AFTER THE BATTLE

THE BATTLE OF THE ALPS
DAMBUSTERS' BOMBS RECOVERY
WIZERNES OPENS
SPITFIRE AT MALDEGEM

9 770306 154073 97

Number 97

NUMBER 97

Edited by Winston G. Ramsey
European Editor: Karel Margry
Published by Battle of Britain Prints International Ltd.,
Church House, Church Street,
London E15 3JA, England
Telephone: 0181-534 8833
Fax: 0181-555 7567
Printed in Great Britain by Plaistow Press Ltd., London E15 3JA

© Copyright 1997

After the Battle is published quarterly on the 15th of February, May, August and November.

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
Seymour Press Ltd., Windsor House, 1270 London Road, Norbury, London SW16 4DH.
Telephone: 0181-679 1899
United States Distribution and Subscriptions:
RZM Imports, PO Box 995, Southbury, CT, 06488
Telephone: 1-203-264-0774
Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1 Northrup Crescent, St. Catharines, Ontario L2M 6P5.
Telephone: (905) 937 3100 Fax: (905) 937 1760
Australian Subscriptions and Back Issues:
Technical Book and Magazine Company, Pty, Ltd., 289-299 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000.
Telephone: 663 3951
New Zealand Distribution:
South Pacific Books (Imports) Ltd., 6 King Street, Grey Lynn, Auckland 2. Telephone: 762-142
Italian Distribution:
Tuttostoria, Casella Postale 395, 1-43100 Parma.
Telephone: 0521 290 387, Telex 532274 EDIALB I
Dutch Language Edition:
Quo Vadis, Postbus 3121, 3760 DC Soest.
Telephone: 035 6018641

CONTENTS

THE BATTLE OF THE ALPS 1

IT HAPPENED HERE
Dambusters' Bombs Recovery 28

PRESERVATION
Wizernes opens to the public 34

UNITED KINGDOM
HMS *Collingwood* 38

WRECK RECOVERY
The Spitfire at Maldegem 50

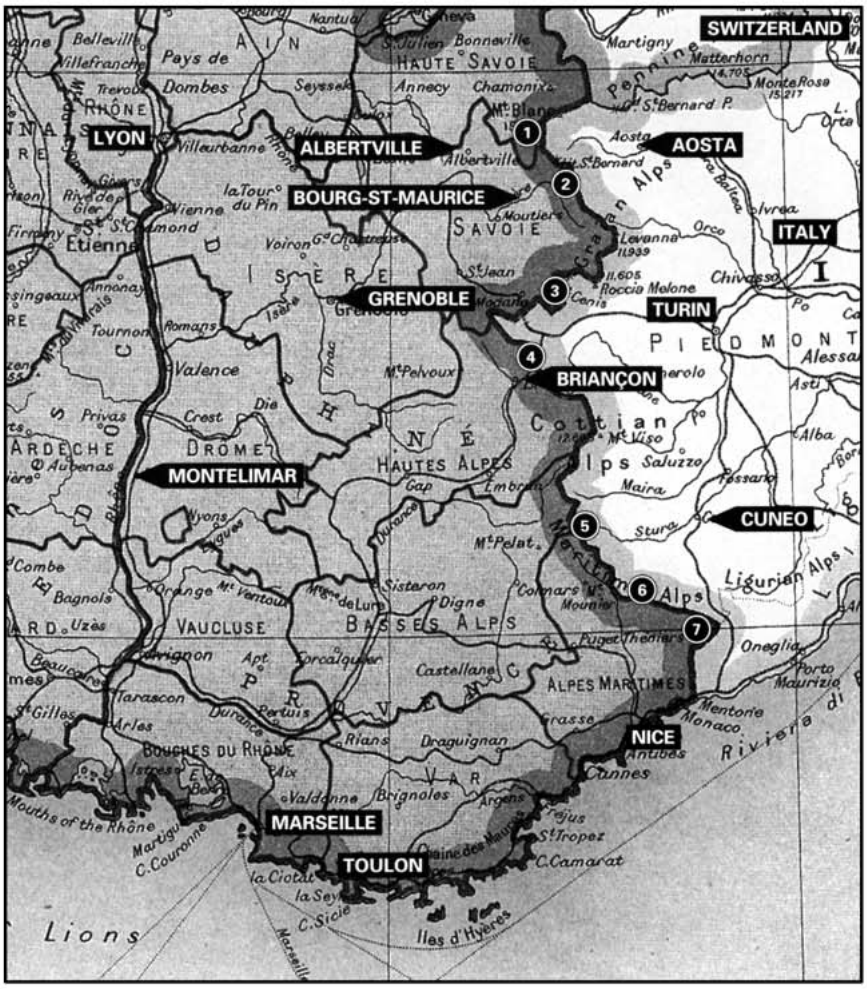
Front Cover: Piloted by Jean-Francois Laignel, with Pierre Brugière as flight engineer, the Ecureil AS 350B1 of the Service Aérien Française (SAF) Hélicoptères company hovers above Block East of Mont Froid. In the background lies Pointe de Clairy. It is SAF's business to provide sightseeing helicopter flights over the Alps. The company is based at Albertville airfield. Tel: 0033 4 79 38 48 29. Fax: 0033 4 79 38 48 42.

Centre Pages: Brute strength by the Royal Engineers during the recovery operation of the 4-ton bouncing bomb at Reculver. (Royal Engineers)

Back Cover: Long after the battle, the remains of Squadron Leader George Reid are laid to rest at Maldegem.

Acknowledgements: The Editor would like to thank Henri Béraud who provided snapshots from veterans of the battle in the Alps and Jacques Fourcart who made available the superb pictures he took there in 1945. Henri is the author of the 480-page picture book *La Bataille des Alpes* (Heimdal). We are also indebted to Général Alain le Ray; to the veterans of the Compagnie Stéphane and to Robert Durot, Sylvain Chinal, Félix Charvoz, Félix Personnaz, Paul Bertrand, Friedrich Herzinger and Hermann Köhler for their personal accounts.

Recognition for their endeavours in identifying the pilot recovered at Maldegem are due to Group Captain D.C. Hencken, BSc, RAF, Defence Attaché, British Embassy Belgium; Flight Sergeant Phil Bushe, MBE, RAF, formerly Defence Section, British Embassy Belgium; Mrs Linda Harvey and Staff of the RAF Central Casualty Section; RAF Historical Branch; AR & TF RAF St Athan; The RAF Museum, Hendon; The Imperial War Museum's Fighter Collection, Duxford; Rolls Royce Heritage Department, Derby; and Peter Arnold.



The Battle of the Alps — the highest battle fought in Europe during the Second World War. By mid-September 1944, with southern France liberated following the landings on the Riviera in August, Allied forces had driven north to link-up with those advancing from Normandy. Meanwhile, Axis forces were facing French troops on the Alpine front between France and Italy. Significant features in our story are [1] Mont Blanc; [2] St Bernard pass; [3] Mont Cenis pass; [4] Montgenèvre pass; [5] Larche pass; [6] Lombarde pass; [7] Tende pass. To photograph the remote mountain fortresses, our author, Jean Paul Pallud, flew by helicopter kindly provided by SAF Hélicoptères, founded by a Free French Air Force pilot, Roland Fraissinet, seen *below* in his Spitfire in England. Then a Sous-Lieutenant aged 20, he had escaped to Spain in November 1942 when the Germans invaded the 'free' southern part of France. After an enforced stay in a Spanish prison, he escaped to Portugal, then reached North Africa. Having volunteered for the Free French Air Force, he was sent to Canada for training. He was soon qualified, but the war ended before he had a chance to fly any combat missions. He joined the reborn Armée de l'Air, flew on P-63 Kingcobras, and was demobbed in 1946 but kept on as a reserve pilot, flying jet fighters such as the Mystère and Mirage. In the mid-1960s, he formed Transair, a fixed base operation, and later became interested in helicopters. Having obtained his licence, he started Héliservice but parted company in the early 1980s to set up SAF Hélicoptères. Today, SAF undertakes load carrying, mountain rescue, and sightseeing flights. Sadly, Roland Fraissinet was killed in a crash while flying a mountain rescue mission in February 1989.

THE BATTLE OF THE ALPS

By Jean Paul Pallud

Following the Allied landing in the Provence on August 15, 1944, the German forces had withdrawn as swiftly as they could from southern France. On August 28, when the battle in the Rhône valley was nearing its end, Lieutenant General Alexander M. Patch, whose US Seventh Army (with French forces under command) had carried out the invasion, issued orders for the next phase of the operation.

In the army centre, the three American divisions under VI Corps were to drive rapidly northwards, and take first Lyon, then Dijon. Meanwhile, the tasks assigned to the French forces were twofold. On the left, having captured Toulon and Marseille, the main French force was to push northward on the west bank of the Rhône in support of the capture of Lyon. East of the river, other French forces were to support the right flank of VI Corps by moving through Grenoble and east of Lyon, before turning along the Swiss border toward the Belfort gap. Patch further instructed the French to relieve all the American forces, the 1st Airborne Task Force included, that were on the right flank, in the area of the Franco-Italian border.

The commander of the French forces, Général Jean de Lattre, was understandably upset by these instructions. With his forces split on both sides of VI Corps, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to unify them as scheduled under an independent French army, the 1ère Armée, in the near future. He put his arguments to Patch and the two commanders compromised. De Lattre acquiesced in sending two divisions up the west bank of the Rhône but it was agreed that these would redeploy east of VI Corps after the fall of Lyon and join the rest of the French forces, thereby uniting de Lattre's army for the attack on the Belfort gap. As for the right flank, Patch conceded that the 1st Airborne Task Force, then the main Allied force still in the Italian border area, was to remain in this sector for the time being.

On September 15, one month after the Riviera landing, the battle for southern France was over. The link-up having been made with the armies advancing from Normandy, the forces from the Mediterranean passed to SHAEF control and were placed under the 6th US Army Group of Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers which became operational that day. By then, the American and French forces from the Mediterranean were fighting in front of the Vosges mountains and the Belfort gap, the 'gate' to the Alsace plain where the Germans had re-established a front.

Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers, the commander of the 6th Army Group, at Grenoble during an award ceremony. In the centre, just under the flag-pole, stands Général Paul Doyen, commander of the Détachement d'Armée des Alpes, covering the Alpine front. In the background, the then-new Maison des Etudiants, a student's residence. When he was himself a student in the 'seventies, the author had a room in this residence for a time. (ECPArmées)

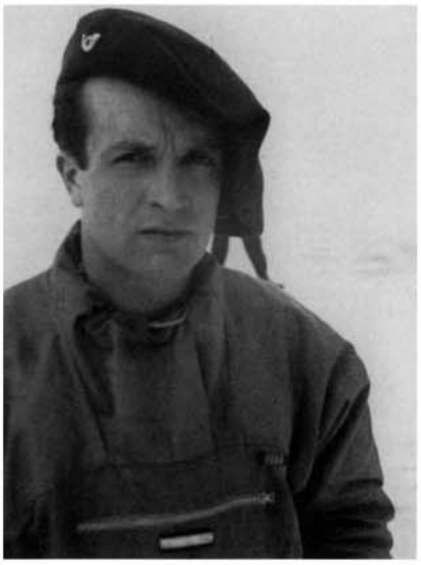
THE ALPINE FRONT

On the 6th Army Group rear flank, from the Swiss border to the Mediterranean, lay the mountain range of the Alps. While the main German forces from southern France withdrew northwards, smaller elements had fallen back on the mountains, until they reached the passes and fortifications which lined the border between France and Italy. There, they stopped and faced westwards. From August 20, they started to launch small-scale counter-attacks from the mountains, many of them successful, the American reconnaissance units of VI Corps that were in the sector usually withdrawing without a fight leaving the local FFI troops to deal with the threat. The largest of the German prizes was Briançon, re-occupied in the evening of August 29.

If the impassable Alps were nothing but a side issue of no interest in the SHAEF plans, the French were not ready to abandon any part of France to the enemy without a fight. While his main forces were pushing towards the Alsace, Général de Lattre decided to temporarily commit his Ier Corps d'Armée in the Alps. On September 1, under Général Emile Béthouart, the corps assumed responsibility for the Alps front, with the 2ème Division d'Infanterie Marocaine (2ème DIM) and the local FFI forces under command. Freed by the French forces, the American VI Corps was to resume its advance northwards.

The new 27ème Division Alpine created in November 1944 integrated FFI units from the Savoie area in its 5ème Demi-Brigade and others of the Isère area in the 7ème Demi-Brigade. More FFI troops from the Ardèche, Drôme and Jura areas formed the 159ème Régiment d'Infanterie Alpine (RIA). In this picture taken at Briançon in May 1945, are (L-R) Lieutenant-Colonel Lucien Marielle Tréhouart, commanding the 159ème RIA; Colonel Jean Vallette d'Osia, commanding the divisional infantry; and Général Marie-Eugène Molle, divisionnal commander. (Francou)

Left: **On September 3, 1944, troops of the Compagnie Stéphane from the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (FFI) parade in Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. The previous evening, they had played a major part in the capture of the town in which the withdrawing Germans intended to make a stand. Sergeant Jacques Barré and Sergeant Jacques Durand led the 2ème Section. (J. Foucart)** *Right:* **We found that this picture had been taken in front of the Town Hall; in the background, an 11th century tower.**



Under its charismatic leader, Capitaine Etienne Poiteau, alias Capitaine 'Stéphane', his nom de guerre, Compagnie Stéphane had fought very aggressively in the Grenoble area since the end of 1943, attacking German posts and ambushing their convoys. They played a significant rôle in the liberation of Grenoble, pressed hard on the heels of the retreating Germans, and were soon fighting in the Maurienne area. *Left:* **This picture was taken on February 21, 1945, at Avérole in the upper valley when Stéphane and some of his men had returned after a two-day patrol to Italy. Capitaine Stéphane (right) was to be killed in another war: on April 4, 1952, near Hanoi. These pictures, as are many others in this story, were taken by Jacques Foucart** *(right)*, **alias 'Flamand' in the Resistance, then a Sous-Lieutenant and Capitaine Stéphane's deputy.**

Général Béthouart pressed the few forces available to immediately start countering the German endeavours in the mountains. One regiment from the 2ème DIM moved to the Briançon sector while a second advanced towards the Maurienne valley. On September 3, the leaders of this latter battle group relieved US reconnaissance units at the Lautaret pass. That same day, a battle group of the 3ème Division d'Infanterie Algérienne (3ème DIA) advanced up to the Tarentaise valley and their leading elements reached Bourg-Saint-Maurice, at the bottom of the Petit-Saint-Bernard pass.

In the Briançon sector, in addition to the battle group of the 2ème DIM, a composite force which comprised the equivalent of ten companies of FFI soon pressed forward with the town as their goal. After two days of fighting for the forts which overlooked it, the French recaptured Briançon on September 7. Higher up in the valley, the Germans stubbornly held on to Montgenèvre and the pass to Italy just above the village, all efforts to dislodge them having failed.

Moving down into the Maurienne valley from the Lautaret pass, the second battle group of the 2ème DIM found out that the local FFI had already freed Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne and, together, they pushed on to Modane from where a railway tunnel led to Italy. The forts that overlooked and controlled the town were captured one after the other and Modane itself was occupied without a fight on September 14. The Germans had withdrawn further up the valley during the previous night and, in the morning, they blew the railway tunnel.

A NEW 27ème DIVISION ALPINE

By mid-September, southern France had been liberated. With the Germans gone, some of the resistance fighters who had fought to free their home town decided that they had done their part and returned home. Many others, disappointed by the confusion and mess that were often the rule in the FFI units, chose to leave their resistance unit to join one of the regular units of the French 1ère Armée. These men soon found themselves fighting on the Alsace front.

However, many of the resistance fighters in south-eastern France chose to stay with their FFI company for the duration of the war, and the FFI force in the area soon reached a considerable strength. The FFI command started to reorganise its forces with plans to resume the fight side by side with their comrades of the 1ère Armée.

If the enthusiasm and the morale of the men were exceptional, their training was inadequate and discipline often lax. The FFI officers were of varied backgrounds and of even more varied competence, with former officers of the army of 1940 serving alongside young leaders born in the maquis. While the former had received real military training, most had been forced to leave the army in 1940 and were, in consequence, lagging behind in the current techniques of warfare. The latter had no proper training and, for some of them, their competence as officers was questionable; often, they owed their largely-inflated rank only to themselves.

Also, the FFI equipment was poor. The troops' uniforms were ill-matched, some items were blue from the old alpine battalions, others green, the rest every shade of khaki. Footwear was in such a poor shape that often the men taking the guard in an advanced post in the snow would have to share and exchange the few good shoes they had between them.

Their armament was of mixed origin. Individual weapons had been obtained from air drops to the resistance, captured army depots, or taken as war booty from the Germans or Italians. The artillery pieces had been mostly captured from the Germans who had themselves taken many of them from the Italians. To supply these guns with the appropriate ammunition turned out to be a nightmare. The same applied to the few available vehicles, many of them captured from the Germans, the others being civilian types. They were of every mark and make, were either petrol or wood-gas fuelled, and most of them suffering from clapped-out engines.

In early September, Colonel Marcel Descour, the FFI commander in the northern Alps, had begun to reorganise his motley forces, but it soon became apparent that whatever the enthusiasm of the men, the lack of training and equipment were such that to use them on a normal front would result in very heavy losses. However, he reasoned that things would be different if these units were engaged in the Alps because operations there would be carried out by small bodies of men spread out over a large area of difficult terrain. His idea was made more feasible because the FFI contained a large number of former officers from the alpine forces which had beaten the Italians back in 1940. De Lattre supported the idea, hoping to be able to turn the main Alpine front over to this new force as soon as possible.

During the autumn, the new Alpine companies began to take shape under the auspices of former 'Alpins' officers who had also fought in the resistance, such as Colonel Jean Vallette d'Osia, former commander of the 27ème Bataillon de Chasseurs Alpins (27ème BCA); Lieutenant-Colonel Jean Craplet, former Lieutenant with the 13ème BCA; and Lieutenant-Colonel Alain le Ray, former Lieutenant with the 159ème Régiment d'Infanterie Alpine (159ème RIA).

Organised into three battalions, the FFI of the Savoie area soon formed the 5ème Demi-Brigade de Chasseurs Alpins, while the three battalions created from those of the Isère area formed the 7ème Demi-Brigade de Chasseurs Alpins. Other FFI units from the Ardèche, Drôme and Jura areas were integrated into the 159ème Régiment d'Infanterie Alpine. The 7ème Demi-Brigade, which plays the central rôle in our story, comprised the 6ème BCA (formerly the FFI 'Bataillon du Vercors'), the 11ème BCA (formerly the 'Bataillon de l'Oisans') and the 15ème BCA (the old 'Bataillon Belledonne').

By mid-November, the 27ème Division Alpine was officially inaugurated, taking the number of a regular mountain division disbanded in June 1940. It consisted of the two newly-created brigades, the 5ème and the 7ème Demi-Brigades de Chasseurs Alpins, and the 159ème RIA. Général Marie-Eugène Molle, himself a former 'Alpins' officer, assumed command with Lieutenant-Colonel Craplet as his chief-of-staff, while Colonel Vallette d'Osia was made commander of the divisional infantry and Lieutenant-Colonel le Ray of the 7ème Demi-Brigade.

Meanwhile, the battle in the north demanded more and more men and, relieved in the Alps by the 4ème Division Marocaine de Montagne (4ème DMM), the 2ème DIM was sent to the Vosges front at the end of September. Two months later, the 4ème DMM was also sent north and in January 1945, it was the turn of the 159ème RIA. So,

Left: **The commander of the Armee Ligurien was the Italian Marshal Rodolfo Graziani (second from left) and the LXXV. Armeekorps commander, General Hans Schlemmer (left). Here, they are pictured during a visit to the 5. Gebirgs-Division in January 1945. The picture was taken in front of the railway station at Bussoleno, some distance down the Italian side of the Mont Cenis pass, where the divisional command post had been established. Second from right is Generalleutnant Max Schrank, the division commander, who was about to hand over his command to Oberst Hans Steets. (Pröhl)**

by early 1945, the two brigades of the 27ème Division Alpine were alone on the northern wing of the Alpine front while seven battalions of FFI and the American 442nd Infantry Regiment were all that remained on the southern wing.

On the German side, the Alpine sector was held by the LXXV. Armeekorps which was part of the German forces in Italy — the only part facing west.

At the beginning of 1945, the German forces in Italy were under Heeresgruppe C of Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring who was also Ob. Südwest (Commander-in-Chief South-West). The army group comprised two armies, the 10. Armee and 14. Armee, which were fighting the main battles in Italy against the Allied 15th Army Group. On the Heeresgruppe's left wing, the LXXXXVII. Armeekorps was holding the Adriatic coastline while on the right wing, the Armee Ligurien was covering the Mediterranean coastline and the Alps.

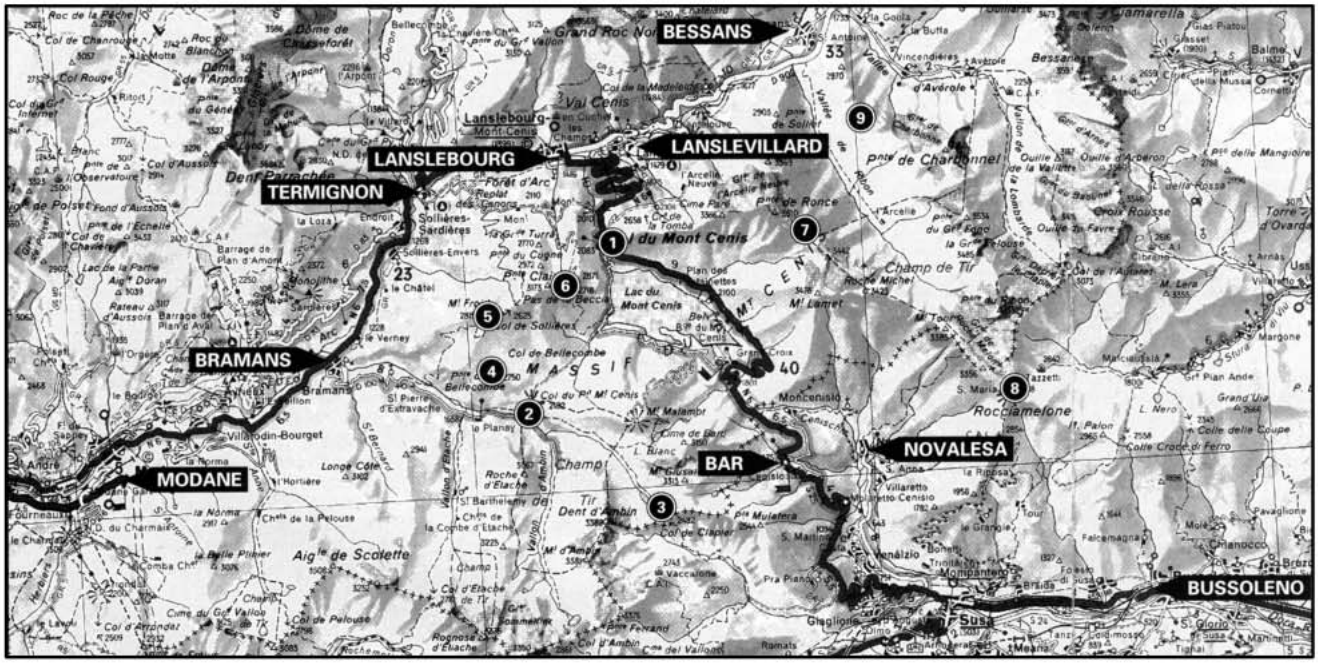
Although Armee Ligurien was under the nominal command of the Italian Marshal Rodolfo Graziani (he was also the Minister of War in Mussolini's Republican Government), the actual command was in the hands of the German staff who seconded him. The army had two corps: the Korps Lombardia and the LXXV. Armeekorps.

Korps Lombardia was holding the coastline sector, between the right flank of the 14. Armee and the Alps with meagre forces. In October, it had one German division, the 232. Infanterie-Division, and two Italian divisions. These were two of the four Italian divisions which had been formed in Germany a few months earlier: the 3. (ital.) Infanterie-Division 'San Marco' and the 4. (ital.) Gebirgs-Division 'Monte Rosa'. About 20 per cent of their personnel were volunteers, though not strictly speaking fascists as these men were mainly drafted in the Italian Waffen-SS units. The units were not seen as very reliable and were mainly deployed on secondary fronts, in between German units.

The LXXV. Armeekorps holding the Alps that autumn consisted of three divisions and a few miscellaneous units in support. The 157. Gebirgs-Division held the northern range of the massif; the 5. Gebirgs-Division was in the centre, while the southern range was held by the 34. Infanterie-Division. The corps also had two battalions of specialised alpine troops, the Hochgebirgs-Jäger-Bataillone 3 and 4. In October, a new Italian division, the 2. (ital.) Infanterie-Division 'Littorio', arrived from Germany and joined the corps in the north. At the end of 1944 , the 157. Gebirgs-Division departed, leaving its

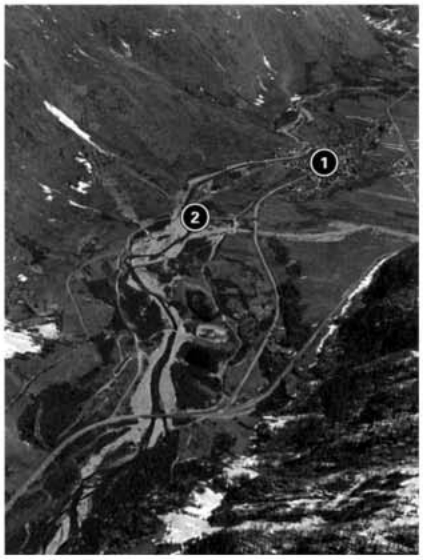
Reaching the passes of the Alps, the retreating Germans halted to face their pursuers, and soon established a front along the whole length of the Franco-Italian border. *Above:* **These men of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 are digging out a machine gun position near the Col des Acles, between Modane and Briançon.** *Below:* **From the autumn, the first elements of the four Italian divisions formed and trained in Germany joined the sector. However, the Germans did not consider them as totally reliable and they were mainly deployed in between German units. These two Italian soldiers were pictured in front of an observation post of Gebirgs-Artillerie-Regiment 95. (Roth and Neuner)**

From mid-September, having blown the last bridge over the Arc river, the Germans withdrew up to the Mont Cenis pass. We found out that this snapshot had been taken in front of the Italian customs post at the pass itself, at an altitude of 2081 metres, where the command post of the 13. Kompanie, Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100, had been established. (Maier) *Right:* Though the building still stands, it is no longer a customs office for the peace treaty signed by Italy in February 1947 resulted in the border being moved some eight kilometres or so to the east, turning over the entire plateau to France.



The Maurienne battlefield. [1] Mont Cenis pass; [2] Petit Mont Cenis pass; [3] Clapier pass; [4] Pointe de Bellecombe; [5] Mont Froid; [6] Pointe de Clairy; [7] Pointe de Ronce; [8] Rochemelon; [9] Ribon valley.

While the Germans established themselves on the mountain crest, the French did the same down in the Maurienne valley. At the bottom of the Mont Cenis pass, Lanslevillard and Lanslebourg remained under the threat of German raids and this sector of the valley stayed a no man's land throughout the winter. *Left:* These Eclaireurs-Skieurs (ski scouts) of the 6ème BCA were pictured in Termignon, just as they were leaving to patrol in the direction of Lanslebourg. (Guillermin) *Right:* We found that the photo had been taken in the main street, looking east from the Arc river bridge.



On the opposite bank of the Arc once stood the Rebon bridge where the FFI ambushed a party of some 30 Germans on September 9, 1944. The river has since overflowed from its wartime course and it has washed away several hundred metres of its bank. The old road to Bessans has now disappeared, as well as the bridge that originally spanned a small tributary at this spot *(right)*. The aerial view *(left)* shows Bessans in the background [1] and the site of the bridge [2].

sector in the hands of the 'Littorio' division, and the 5. Gebirgs-Division shifted its right wing northwards to shoulder the Italians.

The 5. Gebirgs-Division had two regiments of alpine troops, Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 85 and Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100, each with three battalions; one artillery regiment, Gebirgs-Artillerie-Regiment 95; and anti-tank, reconnaissance, engineer, signals and supply units. The division was commanded by Generalleutnant Max Schrank until January 18, 1945, when Oberst Hans Steets took over. Their divisional command post was at Bussoleno, in Italy, some 12 kilometres down the Mont Cenis pass.

The sector of the northern Alpine front which is the subject of our story, was held by the Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100. One of the very first mountain regiments of the Wehrmacht, it had fought throughout the war, from Crete in 1941, then in Russia in the Leningrad sector in 1942-43, and in Italy from 1944. At the beginning of 1945, it was commanded by Oberstleutnant Richard Ernst.

A DIFFICULT AUTUMN

As the Germans withdrew up the Maurienne valley to the bottom of the Mont Cenis pass that led to Italy, they commandeered cattle and sheep for rations and herded them up the pass. Also, probably with the idea of building shelters and defence positions on the top of the mountains, they requisitioned as much timber as they could carry. At the same time, they started to burn down chalets in the mountain pastures to deny them to the French.

By September 7, the Germans were holding just the part of the Maurienne valley which lies at the bottom of the Mont Cenis pass; they still occupied Lanslebourg and Lanslevillard but had given up Termignon, downstream on the Arc river, and Bessans, upstream.

In the days that followed, isolated skirmishes took place with FFI groups but the Germans continued to commandeer livestock and on September 6 arrived at Bessans, ordering that the entire herd was to be delivered to them on the 8th. The Germans threatened that if their demand was not complied with, hostages would be shot and the village burned down. However, the villagers succeeded in obtaining a postponement: the livestock was now to be brought to la Madeleine, at the bottom of the Mont Cenis pass, by midday on September 9. In actual fact, the people of Bessans were not in the mood to deliver up their cattle — some 1,000-head strong — and they decided to make a fight for it. All those unable to join the battle were ordered to leave the village while the remainder, even if they did not possess a weapon, were ordered down to the valley. An ambush was organised at the Rebon bridge, which spanned a small tributary of the Arc river just downstream from the village, and the FFI took up position during the night. On the morning of September 9, a group of some 30 Germans moving from Lanslevillard to Bessans on bicycle fell prey to the ambush, over 15 being killed and several more taken prisoner at no loss to the FFI.

Left: **This rather wonky snapshot taken by Jacques Foucart shows a section of Eclaireurs-Skieurs being presented to officers of the 27ème Division Alpine at Termignon in March 1945.** *Right:* **No major change in this corner of the village in over 50 years. Two memorials commemorate the skirmishes fought at Termignon in the winter of 1944-45. At the western end of the village, a plaque records the names of four soldiers of the 6ème BCA ambushed there by a German patrol in March 1945, and some distance to the east, after the long hairpin bend which surmounts the village, another plaque commemorates the deaths of three soldiers of the 15ème BCA killed at that spot in April 1945.**

On September 13, parties of German soldiers brushed aside the FFI forces that were defending Bessans and took control of the village. They set fire to houses, the large amount of hay stored in the lofts to feed the cattle during the long winter months providing ample fuel to fan the flames, and two-thirds of Bessans was destroyed. Some months later, at the beginning of April 1945, Jacques Foucart took this picture of the ruined village while standing in front of Saint-Antoine Church on the day of the funeral of Corporal Jean-Jacques Coville. He had been killed on the evening of March 31 when one of his ski rods accidentely triggered a mine at the Ribon bridge. Today, there is no grave to his name in the cemetary but a plaque at the end of the new Ribon bridge (different from the Rebon bridge) commemorates his death. (J. Foucart)

On September 13, several parties of German soldiers moved from Lanslevillard against Bessans, sweeping aside the FFI forces. They set fire to several houses but spared the church and withdrew. The hay in the lofts provided good fuel for the fire and one of the villagers who had remained hidden in his house died in the flames. The operation might have been a reprisal for the costly ambush but it was more probably just another step in the German plan to destroy as much accommodation in the upper Maurienne valley as possible.

At the same time, all the men in Lanslebourg between the ages of 15 and 60 were rounded up and held in a local school although none were harmed, and all were eventually released on the 14th when the Germans withdrew.

On September 12, the Germans began destroying the bridges on the Arc river. Two days later having blown the last one (at Lanslebourg) they withdrew up the road to the Mont Cenis pass, leaving only a few outposts to control the valley and keep it under the harassing mortar fire. On September 20, Lanslebourg was mortared and parties of Germans surrounded the village. Sending the villagers to Lanslevillard, they set fire to many of the houses, then withdrew up to the Mont Cenis, taking all the remaining livestock with them.

Meanwhile, regular French units moving from the Riviera beaches had reached the Maurienne front. Lead elements of the 2ème DIM were at Termignon while others which had crossed the 2764-metre-high Iseran pass from the Tarentaise had reached the upper Maurienne valley in the sector of Bonneval and Bessans. In between, at the foot of the Mont Cenis pass, Lanslevillard and Lanslebourg were still in German hands. With the French in the valley and the Germans up on the passes and mountain crest, for a few days each side took up its positions before battle was joined on October 9 when a party of the 2ème DIM from Termignon ambushed a German patrol in Lanslevillard. The Germans reacted swiftly, rushing reinforcements down from Mont Cenis and the small French party was defeated after a battle lasting ten hours. Twelve men had been killed and the remainder, about 20 all told, were taken prisoner. In turn, part of Lanslevillard was burnt down by the Germans. On the 16th, the Germans cleverly manoeuvred the FFI garrison out of Termignon, held the village for a few hours and set fire to many of the houses.

The men of Compagnie Stéphane pray for their fallen comrade. In the centre, between the two figures in the foreground, the company commander, Capitaine Stéphane. The company standard on the right comprised a green star on a white background and had been introduced by Stéphane during the Resistance period when the future was uncertain and hope a necessity. (J. Foucart)

The Maurienne was not the only sector of the Alps to see action during the autumn of 1944. On September 30, a Kampfgruppe of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 85 launched a daring night raid on Abries, some 30 kilometres south-east of Briançon. They surprised the French garrison — the 12ème Tabors — and destroyed three artillery guns and many vehicles, and killed a number of mules before withdrawing with four prisoners. French losses were six men killed, four missing and about 15 wounded. As a result, the French decided to withdraw, after having evacuated the civilians of the area and their livestock, and for seven months the empty town of Abries and the nearby villages remained in no man's land.

On October 2, a small group of nine Jägers attacked the Torino hut, some 3371 metres high, just east of Mont Blanc. Three of the French garrison were killed and six were taken prisoner. Then on the 20th, a small battle group of German and Italian soldiers recaptured the observatory on the Chenaillet, a mountain 2634 metres high above Briançon.

At the end of October, in preparation for the hard winter months to come, the Germans began withdrawing from their advanced positions. In the upper Maurienne valley, they abandoned Lanslevillard and Lanslebourg. Further to the south, they vacated Montgenèvre, north-east of Briançon, and Sospel, just above Menton, but, in the no man's lands thus created, small patrols from both sides stalked each other throughout the winter.

With the first snow falls and the icy winter winds, life in the front line became harsh.

The highest battle fought in Europe. *Top:* **Looking northwards over the Géant glacier, this picture shows the 3500-metre-high no man's land across which French and German forces had faced each other since October 1944 when the Germans recaptured the Turino hut. In the middle background, the Aiguille du Midi, 3842 metres high, and the Midi pass held by the French. Under Hauptmann Karl Siegle, Operation 'Himmelfahrt' began at 3.00 a.m. on February 17, 1945 when 50 Jägers began climbing the glacier in the direction of the Midi pass. The main force — about 25 men under Hauptmann Siegle — was in the centre with a flanking force under Oberleutnant Fritz Hengstler on the left. On the right flank was another smaller force under Leutnant Siegfried Tritthart. Their plan was to destroy the cable car to the Midi pass used by the French and burn down the Requin hut. On the Italian side of the mountain, down the Géant pass, a 75mm mountain gun had been manhandled up to the 1874-metre line above Entrèves to bring the Midi pass within range. (Novak and Hagedorn)**

With temperatures down to minus 20 or minus 30 degrees Centigrade, the men still had to keep watch outside. For protection, they dug trenches in the snow which was soon so thick that, in places, the trenches became tunnels. To bring up supplies to the advanced posts, many of them above the 2500 metre line, was an exhausting task as everything — food and ammunition, but also wood for the stoves — had to be man-carried. Often, the risk of avalanche was so great along the supply routes that advanced positions remained completely cut off for days.

Though the weather limited the scope of operations, conditions did not freeze the front. In December, aiming to make life in the Alps miserable for the Germans, the French started a series of aggressive patrols. On December 20 and again on the 29th, raids were mounted against observation posts in the upper Tarentaise valley and several Italian soldiers of the 'Littorio' division were captured. In the Maurienne, patrols made daily ascents to the remote summits to observe the German positions, often achieving outstanding feats of mountaineering, such as the first ascent in winter of the Aiguille de Scolette, 3150 metres, by its northern face. Leading this patrol was Lieutenant-Colonel le Ray himself.

On January 12, two patrols of white-clad soldiers met in Abries, the ghost town. The German patrol thought that the others were friendly troops but the French were more alert and, taking advantage of the surprise, captured two of the Jägers. On February 7, another French patrol was sent to reconnoitre Ristolas, a small village in the no man's land just south of Abries. To its surprise, Germans were found to be occupying the village, and in the ensuing firefight, seven Frenchmen were killed.

In mid-February, in order to deprive the French of a superb observatory overlooking the Aosta valley, the Germans planned a daring operation to capture the Midi pass, over 3500 metres high, just east of the Mont Blanc. The plan was to destroy the cable car used by the French and burn the Requin hut. The operation started late on February 15 and by the following evening over 100 men had reached the Turino hut. Early next morning, 50 white-clad men started across the Géant glacier, in the direction of the Midi pass but unknown to them, the French had been watching their progress throughout the previous afternoon. In what turned out to be the highest battle fought in Europe, they surprised the Germans and sent them back. Seven Germans were killed, including the commander of the operation, Hauptmann Karl Siegle, with two men taken prisoner.

Having observed the German opening moves, the French rushed reinforcements up to the Midi pass by cable car. Lieutenant Jacques Rachel planned to surprise the Germans and he led his platoon across the glacier in total darkness. Suddenly the two columns met and French and German white-clad ghosts bumped into each other in the darkness. The confused firefight which followed holds the record of being the highest battle ever fought in Europe. This picture was taken after the war when Marcel Ichac had the battle re-enacted for the purpose of a feature film. (M. Ichac)

Left: **The bodies of those Germans killed on the glacier were left where they had fallen and they were soon buried under the snow. Today, the grave of Karl Siegle is still recorded by the German War Graves Commission, as 'the Vallée Blanche glacier'.** *Right:* **On the morning of February 17, Oberjäger Othmar Novak and Gefreiter Karl Schenk, both wounded during the battle of the preceding night, halt for a breather at the Géant pass on their way back. In the background, from left to right, are, Mont Blanc (4807 metres) Mont Maudit (4465 metres) and, just off the picture, Mont Blanc du Tacul (4248 metres). (Novak)**

THE FRENCH TURN TO THE OFFENSIVE

By 1945, there was no military reason to fight for the remote mountains of the Alps, now far from the main battlefields. However, the French had political reasons to continue the fight, for France had laid claims to border adjustments with Italy. In large areas beyond the frontier, such as the Aosta valley, most of the inhabitants were French speaking and many were quite willing to quit Italy. Other territorial demands were motivated by the French desire to have better defensive positions in case of a future attack from Italy, the Italian offensive of June 1940 — the proverbial 'stab in the back' — bringing ample support for these demands.

France believed that if she wanted her claims taken into consideration after the war, it would be a wise precaution to already be in possession of the territory concerned. In the words of de Gaulle in a letter to Général de Lattre, it was a matter of 'gaining a guarantee for our claims, when the peace negotiations start'. At the very least, it was seen that the area of the Petit-Saint-Bernard, Iseran, Mont Cenis, Montgenèvre passes, and the whole of the Tende and la Brigue districts should be in French hands. Occupation of the whole of the Aosta valley and even as far as Turin and Cueno would be even better. However, these sectors of Italy proper actually fell in the Italian theatre of operations and under 15th Army Group jurisdiction, not that of 6th Army Group. Consequently, the French knew that some discretion would be necessary with regard to these wider goals.

After discussion with SHAEF, it was agreed to create a special command subordinated to 6th Army Group to take charge of the Alpine front, and on March 1 Général Paul Doyen assumed command of the Détachement d'Armée des Alpes. He soon reorganised the front into three sectors: in the north, from the Swiss border to the Galibier pass, was the 27ème Division Alpine; in the centre one alpine battalion and two FFI battalions; and in the south one alpine battalion and one American brigade. The latter, the 44th AAA Brigade, was due to be replaced by a French division, which was effected on March 10 when the 1ère Division de Marche d'Infanterie (1ère DMI), a battle-proven division, was withdrawn from the Alsace front.

Late on April 4, in total darkness to avoid being observed by the Germans, the 11ème BCA started out from Bramans. One company was detailed to capture Mont Froid, while the other two were to take the Petit Mont Cenis pass. *Left:* **This snapshot shows Capitaine René Grand, the commander of the 11ème BCA, in front of his command post which we discovered had been located at le Verney (near Bramans) in the last house at the eastern end of the village** *(right).* **Off to the right, behind the house, is Mont Froid. (Grand)**

In mid-March, Doyen was informed that a major offensive was planned on the Italian front, beginning on April 9 (Operation 'Grapeshot' launched by Eighth Army and aimed at breaking the German front on the Senio and Apennines). To support this, the Détachement d'Armée des Alpes was ordered to attack and keep as many German forces as possible tied up in the Alps.

Even with additional reinforcements, the 159ème RIA being sent back from the Alsace front, the Détachement was still far too weak, particularly in artillery and supply trains, to launch a general offensive all along its front, so Doyen planned a staged operation. A series of attacks would be launched from north to south; the first in the Tarentaise valley during the last ten days of March; another in the Maurienne valley in early April, followed by a third in the Authion sector from April 10. A fourth would take place in the Ubaye valley ten days later.

Lieutenant-Colonel Alain le Ray, the commander of the 7ème Demi-Brigade, at the Pointe du Clot (2941 metres) which he had climbed to observe the German positions on Pointe de Bellecombe on the eve of the French offensive in the Maurienne in March 1945. This was the same Alain le Ray who had achieved the first succesful home run after an escape from Colditz Castle in April 1941. (see *After the Battle* No. 63)

THE MAURIENNE VALLEY OFFENSIVE

On the northern wing of the Détachement d'Armée des Alpes, the 27ème Division Alpine had deployed its two brigades side by side, with the 5ème Demi-Brigade de Chasseurs Alpins on the left, in the Tarentaise sector, and the 7ème Demi-Brigade de Chasseurs Alpins on the right in the Maurienne. In this sector, the miserable supply situation proved to be a major difficulty. The railway lines were cut in many places and supply had to depend on motor vehicles of which few were available, all in poor shape. The valleys were quite long (the Maurienne was over 100 kilometres from Aiguebelle to Bessans), with narrow and winding roads, and many of the bridges had been blown by the Germans.

The French offensive in the Maurienne aimed at recovering the Mont Cenis pass, a large plateau about 2000 metres high. This sector was held by the III. Bataillon of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 under Major Gerhard Singer. From the northern side of the plateau, turning anti-clockwise, the front was held by the 11. Kompanie as far as the Pointe de Ronce; the 13. Kompanie held the Grand Mont Cenis pass and the top of the ring as far as the Pointe de Clairy; while the 12. Kompanie held the line as far as the Petit Mont Cenis pass, via the Mont Froid and Pointe de Bellecombe. The southern side was held by Italians of the 'Folgore' parachute battalion. At the bottom, in the hospice buildings, was the bataillon command post and elements of the 14. and 15. Kompanies were held in reserve nearby. Distributed across the plateau and further down on the Italian side were eight 75mm guns from two batteries of Gebirgs-Artillerie-Regiment 95.

The 7ème Demi-Brigade commander, Lieutenant-Colonel le Ray, planned a two-stage operation against the plateau with diversionary attacks on the wide flanks. On the first day he planned to capture a series of German positions on the south-western side of the mountain ring which would deprive the Germans of means to observe the French movements down below. It would, in turn, give the French superb observation posts overlooking the German positions on the Mont Cenis plateau. As diversionary attacks, le Ray planned to send two company-strong patrols across the mountains to skirt the Mont Cenis bulge, one north, the other south, to threaten the road leading to the plateau from Italy, far in the rear of the Germans. In a second stage, the main attack was to take command of the plateau itself.

The Mont Cenis looking north-westwards. Like a bowl at an altitude of about 2000 metres, it is surrounded by mountains 2600 to 3600 metres high with a lake at the bottom. In 1945, the Franco-Italian border ran along the western side of the plateau forming a large Italian bulge westwards but today the frontier runs beneath the helicopter. The Mont Cenis pass is in the middle distance with Pointe de Clairy on the left and Pointe de Ronce in the middle distance on the right.

In the Tarentaise, on the division's left wing, the 5ème Demi-Brigade opened the French offensive as planned on March 23, aiming to capture the Petit-Saint-Bernard pass. Fighting in the terrible cold conditions, at altitudes over 2000 metres, on March 31, the 13ème BCA succeeded in recovering the Roc Noir, a 2342-metre-high rock on the eastern shoulder of the pass. On April 10, the 7ème BCA captured the Roc de Belleface, a 2857-metre-high cliff on the western shoulder, which gave the French a superb view on the pass itself and all movements thereon, as well as over all the enemy positions on the eastern shoulder. The Germans could obviously not let such a situation develop and they launched a daring counter-attack on the night of April 20/21, and by next morning, the rock was again in German hands.

On March 31, the artillery batteries which had supported the attack had started to move from the Tarentaise to the Maurienne to support the 7ème Demi-Brigade attack which was due to start on April 5. Though the two valleys were parallel, the mountains in between were impassable necessitating a 150-kilometre detour via Albertville.

As the guns were progressively arriving at their planned firing positions, the 7ème Demi-Brigade was readying its three battalions, the 6ème BCA, the 11ème BCA and the 15ème BCA, for the attack. The weather was warm, snow was melting and Lieutenant-Colonel le Ray decided to go in on April 4. However, on the morning of April 3, the weather suddenly changed and it started to rain. The rain turned to snow, making the planned approach moves exhausting and dangerous, so the attack was postponed for a day.

On the evening of April 4, the 11ème BCA moved out for the first part of the operation. It was a three-fold attack: from west to east, one company was to take the Mont Froid, 2822 metres high; a platoon was to capture an observatory on the Pointe de Bellecombe, 2750 metres high; and two companies were to occupy the Petit Mont Cenis pass, over 2000 metres high.

As for the diversionary action from the north, the 1ère Compagnie of the 15ème BCA under Capitaine Etienne Poiteau (alias Stéphane, his nom de guerre in the Resistance) was to advance up the Ribon valley to reach and cross the Rochemelon glacier at an altitude of over 3300 metres, and then drop down to Novalesa. From the south, the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA, under Capitaine Bordenave, was to advance just below the Petit Mont Cenis pass, capture the Malamot fort, altitude 2914 metres, and then move eastwards as far as the village of Bard, on the road to the plateau.

To plan the offensive against the Mont Cenis plateau, the 7ème Demi-Brigade sent daily patrols to observe the German positions. *Left:* In March 1945, Jacques Foucart pictured this ski patrol of the 15ème BCA returning from a reconnaissance higher up the valley as it reached l'Ecot, a hamlet above Bonneval. In the background, the Méan Martin, 3330 metres high. *Right:* On our way to Mont Froid in the SAF helicopter, we took this remarkable comparison.

MONT FROID

Mont Froid (Cold Mountain) is a long and narrow summit which culminates at 2822 metres at its western end. At each end stood a stone fortress built by the French Army at the turn of the century. The Germans had refurbished these forts, set up a strong point in between, and dug foxholes in the rocks and snow to reinforce each of the three positions. In April 1945, these positions were manned by a platoon of the 12. Kompanie of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100.

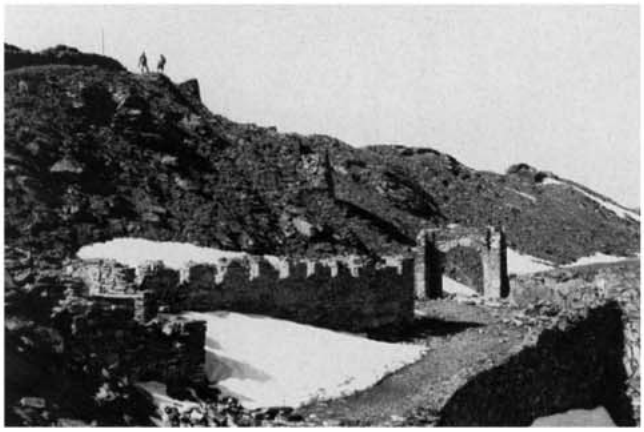
The capture of Mont Froid was entrusted to the 4ème Compagnie of the 11ème BCA under Capitaine Louis Branche. For the attack, the company was reinforced by two platoons of Eclaireurs-Skieurs (ski scouts) and the assault force assembled at Bramans. To preclude observation by the Germans, the ascent from the bottom of the valley up to the attack positions — a climb of over 1500 metres — had to be achieved in darkness. The attackers, some 200 strong, started from Bramans at 6 p.m. on April 4 as planned but, because of the deep snow, the ascent of the Général Sarret crest, the long ridge that projected to the west of Mont Froid, was slow and exhausting, and it was 3 a.m. next morning before the troops reached their scheduled positions and reorganised for the attack.

Because of the narrowness of the summit and the small force available, the French were unable to attack all three strong points which crowned Mont Froid at the same time so they decided to start with a simultaneous assault against Block West and Block Centre. Jumping off in the early morning of April 5, the attackers soon surrounded the two blocks. The surprised Germans resisted for a while but the garrison of Block Centre, about ten men, soon surrendered although fighting continued at Block West. Finally, the French sent one of their prisoners as a parliamentary to the trapped garrison and, after about ten minutes of negotiation, the ten-men garrison surrendered too.

The French then advanced along the summit line to attack Block East, but surprise was lost and the noise of battle had alerted the garrison. The French pressed on but four men were killed within minutes so it was decided to wait for darkness to resume the assault. In the afternoon, the Germans started to shell the top of Mont Froid and the French, who could only shelter between pieces of rock, suffered more casualties.

Late in the evening, and again in the middle of the night, the French repeated their attempts to capture the block, still without success. At midnight, it was the Germans' turn as they attempted to recover Block Centre, but the French called down artillery fire on the top of the mountain, which put an end to the German attack.

The Mont Froid — the Cold Mountain — as seen from overhead in April 1997. At the eastern end of the mountain *(above)*, the stone fortress of Block East is still in good shape. The picture *(below)* extends the view from that above and shows the western half of the long and narrow summit, including Block Centre (the long wall on the left), and Block West (in the background, on the top of the mountain). Such are the wonderful views one has when touring the battlefield by helicopter. Although based at Albertville, SAF operates from several different points in the Alps.



On the reverse slope of the mountain, small barrack blocks provided protection against the weather. *Left:* **This is what remains today of the barracks at Block East, with the 'front' wall facing the Italian positions to the top left.** *Right:* **This shot of the barracks at Block West also shows, in the background, the north-western ridge that reaches up to the summit.**

The French assaulted Block East on the morning of April 6 only to discover that the Germans had vacated the fortress during the night, leaving behind three of their dead in the snow, one of them lying on the top of the squat stone bastion which crowned the fortress. *Left:* **Two veterans of the Alpine troops, Sylvain Chinal, of the 13ème BCA in 1945, and Félix Charvoz of the 15ème BCA, who agreed to climb up to Mont Froid with Jean Paul, stand on the spot where Eclaireur Paul Bertrand planted a Tricolour flag on April 6, 1945, triggering a strong mortar fire from the Germans.** *Right:* **Some distance to the east of the crowning edifice, and linked to it by a continuous stone rampart, the other bastion was the prow of the fortress, facing the Italian positions across the border, then only a few hundred metres away.**

Next morning (April 6), the commander of the 2ème Section d'Eclaireurs Skieurs, Lieutenant Julien Faure, sent a group of volunteers, some 15 men, to conquer the stubborn Block East. At about 10 a.m., under cover of a thick cloud which drifted across the mountain top, the group assaulted the fortress. Throwing hand-grenades, they rushed forward only to find that the Germans had withdrawn down the eastern slope of Mont Froid, leaving behind the dead bodies of three of their comrades, one on the top of the crowning bastion. Some time later, Eclaireur Paul Bertrand planted a Tricolour flag which triggered a strong mortar stonk from the Germans, who had probably been waiting for a sign of the French entering the abandoned fortress.

On April 7, the tired men of the 4ème Compagnie, 11ème BCA, who had captured Mont Froid, were relieved by the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA. This snapshot *(left)* **of soldiers of the 6ème BCA was taken in Block East the following day.** *Below left:* **Instead of an exact comparison, we have chosen this symmetrical view of the old gate to Block East. As these pictures show, much of the old French fortifications on Mont Froid still exist, particularly at Block East. Also, many relics left over from the fighting in 1945 can still be found on the slopes of the mountain: pieces of shrapnel, unexploded shells, remains of grenades and mortar shells, empty rifle cartridges, both German and French, barbed wire, telephone wire and the large porcelain insulators which supported them, the remains of boots, etc. Jean Paul even came across a stretcher! Though removed when reported to the authorities, many live shells still remain hidden in the rocks, as well as mines. We warn our readers of the risk and that a visit to such a battlefield must only be undertaken with the utmost caution.**

Left: **The old gate to Block East, photographed from the outside of the fortress; of interest is the remains of the drawbridge that once crossed the ditch in front of the gate.** *Right:* **A similar gate can be seen at Block West — another exterior view. Jean Paul's visit took place in early summer and, although some snow might still be found on the summit in May or even June, it should not be a great hindrance at this time of the year for an average mountaineer.**

POINTE DE BELLECOMBE

While the 4ème Compagnie assaulted Mont Froid, the 3ème Section d'Eclaireurs Skieurs started to climb a 500-metre-high almost sheer cliff to surprise the few Germans that were on the Pointe de Bellecombe. Two days earlier, helped by Lieutenant Edouard Frendo, a skilled climber and a famous mountain guide, the platoon commander, Adjudant Adrien Vasserot, had found a way to the top. On the night of April 4/5, again with Frendo in the lead, Vasserot led his full section up the rock face. The section managed to successfully and silently scale the cliff, save for one man who lost his grip (he escaped with only a broken shoulder). At dawn, Vasserot deployed his men just under the summit.

As the Germans thought that an attack from this side of the mountain was impossible, the alarm was sounded too late. By 6 a.m., after a short exchange of fire, the French were masters of the Pointe de Bellecombe. Three Germans had been killed and at least two others had escaped.

The French pressed on, running down the snowy slope eastwards. Meanwhile, alarmed by the noise of the firefight, the main German defence outpost, comprising around ten men, had been alerted in the shelter in which they were resting, about 50 meters below the summit. However, the French easily turned them back and soon captured the observatory at vantage point 2620, some distance to the east of the Bellecombe summit. In the process, a few more Germans had been killed and nine captured.

Nevertheless success was short lived for the French. It soon appeared that the follow-up section, bringing up further supplies of ammunition, had been unable to surmount the cliff with heavy loads on their backs. With ammunition running low, and no prospect of supply or reinforcement at short notice, the French situation on Bellecombe was, at best, difficult. At 10 a.m., the German artillery started to hammer the summit and, later in the morning, a first counter-attack from the north-east by Italian paratroopers of the 'Folgore' battalion was repulsed.

Artillery and mortar shelling made the French positions more and more uncomfortable and, by 5 p.m., the shelling was so severe that they had to take shelter in the rocks at the top of the vertical cliff on the southern side.

In the evening, a new counter-attack forced the French to evacuate the observatory point and fall back to the very top of the Pointe de Bellecombe. With only 20 men left, and with ammunition supplies exhausted, Vasserot had no other option but to withdraw. In the dark, with crampons on their shoes, the men descended down the icy south-western slopes of the mountain.

Pointe de Bellecombe as it appears from the east. The 600-metre-high cliff climbed by the French attackers is just behind the summit, and thus not visible from this angle, but the smaller cliffs in the foreground give an idea of how sheer it is. Above the cliff on the left was the German observatory at vantage point 2620.

The Germans wiped off the Pointe de Bellecombe by the French were artillery observers. The guns, four 75mms of the 1. Batterie of Gebirgs-Artillerie-Regiment 95, were sited at les Rivets, between the lake and the Petit Mont Cenis pass. After the French success on Pointe de Bellecombe, these guns started to hammer the summit and they soon destroyed a cross that stood there. As a memorial to his friends killed on April 5, the officer in charge of these guns, Leutnant Friedrich Herzinger, promised to replace the cross one day. *Left:* **With the help of the French Army, he honoured his vow on September 7, 1986.** *Right:* **This snapshot taken in 1942 near Leningrad shows Obergefreiter Karl Oberer (left), one of those killed on the Pointe de Bellecombe. His name appears 'in Memoriam' on the cross, together with Unteroffizier Anton Stöhr, Oberwachtmeister Walter Hahn, Kanonier Walter Pötzel, Kanonier Max Haschka, Kanonier Lorenz Rettenegger and Kanonier Michael Schmied. Today, all of them are buried in Italy, in the German Military Cemetary at Costermano, near Lake Garda.**

PETIT MONT CENIS PASS

Meanwhile, the main attack on the Petit Mont Cenis pass had not gone as planned. The operation had begun at 6.30 a.m. with an artillery barrage on the enemy positions at the top of the pass. At 7 a.m., the French gunners changed to firing smoke-shells for five minutes, the idea being that the Italian soldiers would recognise these as the end of the artillery preparation and rush to their defence positions. Then, at 7.05 a.m., the gunners returned to firing high-explosive shells, hoping that these would catch some of the Italians in the open.

It had been planned to send one company to attack each of the two shoulders of the pass. About 8 a.m., the men of the 3ème Compagnie, 11ème BCA, reached the western shoulder, the Croix du Coleret, to find it abandoned by the Italians but losing three men to mines.

On the other side of the pass, however, the 1ère Compagnie had encountered so many difficulties with deep and treacherous snow during its approach march along a narrow valley that dawn came well before they had reached their assembly area. The company commander, Lieutenant Robert Franconie, knew that to advance in daylight, in full view of the enemy positions on top of the Coulours rock, would be a costly exercise, so he decided to shelter his men for the day at the bottom of the rock. Meanwhile, he sent a messenger to the battalion to explain the situation, proposing to resume the advance the following night.

This failure was of grave consequence for the 3ème Compagnie's right flank at the top of the pass was now left wide open to enemy counter-attacks, and at 9 a.m., the Germans started to mortar the positions taken by the French. Later in the morning, Italian paratroopers counter-attacked, but the French managed to repulse them with difficulty. Another counter-attack was turned back in the afternoon, but mortaring continued and the French positions were getting more and more untenable.

Le Ray lacked fresh troops to reinforce the 3ème Compagnie and, by evening, having learned of the withdrawal of his platoon from the Pointe de Bellecombe, he decided to withdraw them too. A platoon of Eclaireurs-Skieurs was sent up to the pass to help the beleaguered men to evacuate their wounded and the withdrawal started next morning. The descent of the steep and icy slopes under the direct fire of the Italians above on the crest was a nightmare.

LA TURRA

Though the operations launched on April 5 were not as successful as had been hoped, with only Mont Froid having been captured, le Ray decided to proceed with the second stage of his plan aimed at the conquest of the Mont Cenis pass itself. The 15ème BCA was to launch a pincer attack on both shoulders of the pass, with the 2ème Compagnie capturing la Turra, an old fort on a crest at 2507 metres on the western shoulder and the 4ème Compagnie taking another strong position on the eastern side — the Ouillon des Arcellins — as soon as the la Turra fort was captured. The attack against the la Turra fortress was planned for April 6 as a three-fold operation: while two platoons of the 2ème Compagnie launched the main assault from the west, a third platoon was to attack directly up the steep slope to the north-west. Meanwhile, as a diversion, the 3ème Compagnie was to try to capture the mountain ridge to the south-west that ran parallel to the one crowned by the fort.

Having climbed up the Pointe de Cugne, 2975 metres, the previous afternoon, the leaders of the 3ème Compagnie had to endure a terrible night in the open blasted by a strong icy wind. To prevent them from freezing to death in their sleep, the NCOs had to wake up the men every quarter of an hour. At daybreak, they started in the direction of the Pointe de Clairy but the snow had frozen hard and every step had to be kicked deep into the steep slope. After a few hundred metres of slow advance, a German outpost spotted them and two machine guns opened up. The French returned fire but the Germans were well protected and Sous-Lieutenant Commier had no alternative but to order his leaders to fall back from their exposed positions.

Below, in the Cléry valley, the main force of the 2ème Compagnie had lost much time owing to deep snow and ice. Surprise was lost and as they started to climb the iced-up western slopes that led to the la Turra fort, they too came under fire from well-concealed machine guns overlooking them. They returned fire, with no apparent result, and the field artillery equally failed to silence the German positions.

While the main force was thus pinned down, a small group higher up the valley managed to reach a position from where an attack was possible. They rushed the German positions but their leader was immediately cut down by a burst of automatic fire. The remainder of the squad took cover but, after waiting for reinforcements, they recovered their wounded comrade and withdrew. In the afternoon, the attack on the fort was called off.

On the other shoulder of the pass, having waited all day for the artillery barrage that was due to open their attack on the Ouillon des Arcellins, the 4ème Compagnie finally received an order to withdraw that evening. With surprise lost, it was seen that it would be suicidal to try again next morning.

The diversionary attacks aimed at sending strong patrols into Italy, far in the German rear, had run into trouble too. On the left, elements of the 1ère Compagnie of the 15ème BCA had advanced as planned up the Ribon valley on April 5. All the way, they encountered deep snow and had to watch out for avalanches. They soon came under fire from enemy outposts and nightfall found them on the Rochemelon glacier at an altitude of over 3000 metres. They had to build igloos to survive the intense cold but when, next morning, the weather was no better, the order to fall back down to the Ribon valley soon arrived.

Early on April 5, having overcome many difficulties with deep snow during their approach march, the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA (detailed to capture the Malamot fort) and the 1ère Compagnie of the 11ème BCA (attacking the Petit Mont Cenis pass) found themselves at the bottom of the Savine valley in full view of the enemy. Therefore, the two company commanders decided to shelter their men for the day at the bottom of the Coulours rock. (Guillermin)

On the right, the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA, sent to capture the Malamot fort, had started up the Savine valley on the evening of April 4, together with the company of the 11ème BCA that had to attack the Petit Mont Cenis pass. They too were held up by the deep snow and next morning they were still at the bottom of the valley in full view of the enemy positions. Consequently, the two company commanders decided to shelter their men for the day at the bottom of the Coulours rock. A messenger was sent to battalion to report their intention to resume the advance the following night but, during the course of the day, the whole operation was cancelled.

The over-ambitious French operation in the Maurienne had shot its bolt. With the planned move by the artillery south to the Authion sector to support the next phase of the offensive, le Ray cancelled all further action for the time being. Although the main military objective of the operation — to tie up as many German troops as possible — had undoubtedly been achieved, the political aim, to recover French territory and conquer parts of Italy, had not.

The reasons for the failure are several. Firstly, the French high command had failed to appreciate the difficulties of the weather and terrain and the forces engaged were too few to succeed. In March and April, the Alps are never easy, with snowfalls and icy winds, and the unexpected period of bad weather which started on April 5 further aggravated the situation. Also, and this was not always apparent from a map, there was, sometimes up to 2000 metres of altitude between the starting point and the objective of the attack. To have a chance of reaching their assembly area, the attack forces should have been given more time; there should also have been more manpower to bring up the necessary supplies of food, water, ammunition, tents, barbed wire, mines, etc. In the event, most of the soldiers were exhausted carrying supplies up the mountain themselves. There had been artillery support but the shells proved largely ineffective in the loose, deep snow. Fighter-bombers might have been more effective, at least on the morale of the Germans, but no squadron could be made available for this remote front of no importance.

On a crest at an altitude of 2507 metres, the old fort of la Turra controlled the Mont Cenis pass; the Italian customs post (see page 5) was one kilometre away to the east. The French attack developed up the slope that can be seen on the right. A herd of chamois were startled by the sudden appearence of our helicopter, running helter-skelter across the mountain (the dots in the snow at centre left).

Sometime in January 1945, the LXXV. Armeekorps commander, General Schlemmer, was photographed discussing the situation with Generalleutnant Schrank, the 5. Gebirgs-Division commander, (left) and Major Helmut Hermann, commanding the I. Bataillon of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 (right). In April, following the French capture of Mont Froid, Schlemmer agreed that it would be wiser to abandon the Mont Cenis plateau but Ob. Südwest rejected the proposition and Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 was instructed to maintain its positions. (Pröhl)

To plan his counter-attack, Oberleutnant Georg Rohleder, the commander of 1. Kompanie (I. Bataillon) of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100, climbed the Pointe de Clairy to observe the French positions on Mont Froid. No photos were taken that day but the scene on the top must have looked much like this snapshot taken in February 1945 of Leutnant Herbert Urban, Oberleutnant Rohleder, Major Hermann and Leutnant Johannes Finkaus relaxing on an unnamed summit. Both Urban and Rohleder were to be badly wounded during the Mont Froid counter-attack.

THE GERMAN COUNTER-ATTACK ON MONT FROID

Though the French were still master of Mont Froid, they were in a difficult situation. The weary men were in shallow foxholes, exposed to the icy winds and occasional shelling. They were exhausted, in need of supplies, food included, and the cold was so intense that weapons froze and refused to fire.

About midnight on April 6, a strong artillery and mortar barrage suddenly hit the top of the mountain and a counter-attack developed against Block East. Two platoons of the 12. Kompanie of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 and two platoons of Italian paratroopers from the 1st Company of the 'Folgore' Battalion attacked from the Sollières pass, up the snowy eastern slope of Mont Froid, and soon encircled the French position.

A confused battle raged in the darkness and the shaken French had to fall back on Block Centre, which itself soon came under attack. Panzerfaust rounds flashed and exploded in the darkness and, by 4 a.m., the French were compelled to abandon the position, falling back on a new defence line across the summit, about 80 metres behind Block Centre. The Germans pressed on with their attack for a while but the French held their ground.

The German artillery barrage due to sustain their attack failed to materialise, but French guns were now hammering the eastern slope, pinning down German reinforcement and supply parties. On the top, the French were reinforced at 3 a.m. by elements of the 2ème Compagnie, 11ème BCA. Relief came none too soon, as the French defenders were down to their last cartridges, but they counter-attacked and drove the exhausted Germans off the summit, back to the eastern side of the mountain.

When April 7 dawned, the top of Mont Froid was still in French hands, but to hold it had cost them 15 dead, as many wounded, and three men missing, probably captured. Among them was Capitaine Roger Martinerie, the commander of the 2ème Compagnie, 11ème BCA, who had led the attack in darkness. The French recovered four machine guns and two mortars left behind by the Germans.

In the morning, the exhausted remnants of the 4ème Compagnie were relieved on Mont Froid by the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA. Over the days that followed, the newcomers struggled to reinforce their hold on the mountain: telephone lines were laid from one position to another and supplies were manhandled up the 1500 metres from Bramans.

On the other side of the mountain, the Germans were worried. The soldiers all knew that the war was about to end with the total defeat of Germany and the necessity to fight in such difficult conditions on a remote front so far from home was openly questioned. In the circumstances, knowing that the line of outposts holding the heights around the Mont Cenis plateau was dangerously stretched and his men exhausted, the commander of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100, Oberstleutnant Richard Ernst, decided that it was wiser to abandon the whole of the plateau. The division commander, Oberst Hans Steets, agreed with his proposal as well as the LXXV. Armeekorps commander, General Hans Schlemmer, but Ob. Südwest rejected it, and Ernst was instructed to maintain his positions.

Ernst judged that a status quo on the Mont Froid was just impossible to accept: the French positions there were a major threat to his III. Bataillon and, since he could not withdraw, he saw no other option but to recapture the mountain. Steets agreed and Ernst obtained the first squadron from Aufklärungs-Abteilung 85 as reinforcement and one more battery of artillery. He planned to attack on April 12 and he gave the job to the 1. Kompanie of Oberleutnant Georg Rohleder. While Rohleder started to assemble his attack force, the fresh troops of Aufklärungs-Abteilung 85 were engaged in the exhausting job of hauling supplies, particularly ammunition, up to the attack positions.

To decide on his plan of attack, Rohleder personally climbed the Pointe de Clairy, 3162 metres high, to observe the Mont Froid, some 350 metres lower down. He knew that a direct assault on the eastern end from the Sollières pass had already failed and an attack up the steep southern side was

This is the commanding view Oberleutnant Rohleder had had from the top of the Pointe de Clairy. He planned to move his company by night below the southern side of Mont Froid, turn around the western end and so reach the northern side — which was the French rear — to mount his attack. A subsidiary advance by the 12. Kompanie was then to start from the Sollières pass. This picture shows to the right and behind Mont Froid, the Maurienne valley looking downstream; branching off to the left, we can also see the Savine valley that leads to the Clapier pass (see page 19).

Left: **The narrowness of the summit of Mont Froid is very apparent in this view from the helicopter looking westwards from a point directly above Block East. Block Centre is not visible from this point but Block West appears clearly in the background, culminating at 2822 metres. Dropped off on the top near Block East, Jean Paul took pictures (see front cover) while Pierre Brugière liaised with the pilot, Jean François Laignel, via the radio. Jean Paul's son Johan took this picture. With Feldwebel Thiel, the 2nd platoon commander, having been killed and Oberleutnant Rohleder, the company commander, wounded along with the two other platoon commanders, Leutnant Urban and Feldwebel Kerscher, Oberjäger Franz Roth** *(right)* **remained the only active officer of the 1. Kompanie when April 12 dawned on Mont Froid. (Roth)**

obviously impossible. He therefore decided on a bold manoeuvre: by night and in silence, his company would pass below the southern side of Mont Froid, just under the French positions, turn around the western end and reach the northern side, and attack the French from the rear. To hide this move, artillery and mortars were to lob harassing shells onto the summit. As soon as the 1. Kompanie had launched its attack from the north, a subsidiary attack was then to be made from the Sollières pass by the 12. Kompanie.

On April 11, the day before the German attack, the French launched a daring attack on the Pointe de Clairy and its western ridge which overlooked the Sollières pass, as the French knew that its conquest would give them control of the pass and reinforce their tenuous hold on Mont Froid. During the night, three platoons of the 11ème BCA and another from the 15ème BCA had advanced from the north, the former three climbing up along the Erellaz valley, the latter going directly for the top, via the Pointe de Cugne. Early in the morning, having climbed a very steep slope of frozen snow, the leading platoon of the 15ème BCA reached the crest and was approaching the summit of the Pointe de Clairy. Just then, down on their right on the snowy flank of the mountain, the leaders of the 1ère Section d'Eclaireurs-Skieurs, 11ème BCA, came across a German outpost. It was wiped out in a few minutes but the gun-fire roused the entire German position. It was not yet daylight but machine guns opened up from the crest and they soon pinned down the French.

On the top, the leaders of the 15ème BCA hurried for the summit, only to bump into a group of Germans from the 12. Kompanie who had rushed up from the other side at the sound of the first shots. Both parties took cover behind rocks and snow at short range on each side of the summit and exchanged bursts of fire and lobbed hand-grenades. By now, it was daylight and, firing signal flares, the French called for artillery on the Pointe de Clairy. The gunners complied but the shells had no sizeable effect in the deep snow, fortunately for the French as the first salvo fell among them.

Though the vanguard of the main French force had gained a foothold on the western ridge of the Pointe de Clairy, they were pinned down and French artillery and machine guns firing from the top of Mont Froid failed to silence the well-concealed German weapons.

From the top of Mont Froid, where he had climbed to observe the advance of his men, le Ray had a clear view of the situation. Once again, surprise had not been achieved and to persevere would only mean more losses, for no gain. About 10 a.m., he therefore ordered the attack to be halted and the lead troops to fall back. The battered attackers withdrew, carrying the wounded and the bodies of those killed down with them. Lieutenant Julien Faure, commanding the platoon which had reached the top of the ridge, was among those killed.

In the meantime, the French had decided to relieve those elements of the 1ère Compagnie of the 6ème BCA which had been exposed on the top of Mont Froid for five days. The 3ème Compagnie was to take its place, the changeover being scheduled for the night of April 11/12. Knowing that the operation would be a difficult one, the company commander, Lieutenant André Gonnet, moved up with only three of his platoons on the first night. After an exhausting climb from Bramans lasting six hours, they reached the top between 10 p.m. and midnight and took up their positions: one platoon occupying Block West, another Block Centre and the third Block East. As the men who had been relieved started down for warm quarters in the valley, Gonnet established his command post in Block West.

Meanwhile, Rohleder's battle group of about 150 men, had started at about 11 p.m. from the Sollières pass. In single file, under strong order not to make any noise, they advanced westwards right across the southern slope of Mont Froid, moving nearly horizontally at about 2650 metres, some 200 metres below the French positions which were by then under harassing mortar and artillery fire. A strong and icy wind blew snow across the night.

Having turned round the Général Sarret ridge, and then moved all along the western side of the mountain, the Jägers reached the northern side and at 1 a.m., they started to climb. Quite probably, though neither of them had seen the others, the climbing Germans had passed within one hundred yards of the men of the 1ère Compagnie descending to Bramans.

About 2 a.m., two German platoons deployed silently around Block West with a third remaining in reserve facing north-west to stop any French unit that might unexpectedly be climbing up to Mont Froid. In the dark, the leaders silently crept to within a few metres of the French positions before launching the attack, the Jägers shouting, throwing grenades and firing wildly. They soon overwhelmed Block West but groups of French soldiers resisted in trenches and foxholes and German casualties were heavy.

Many of the shelters and foxholes constructed on Mont Froid by its French and German defenders can still be seen today almost as they were left in 1945. This one was pictured between Block West and Block Centre.

The company commander, Oberleutnant Rohleder, was wounded, as were his two platoon commanders. Two men carried Rohleder down to his reserve platoon where he ordered its commander, Feldwebel Otto Thiel, to take it into action on the summit.

The French commander, Lieutenant Gonnet, caught in an open trench in front of Block West, ran across the line of fire and managed to reach Block Centre unscathed. He conferred with the position commander, Aspirant François de la Forte, and then proceeded to Block East intending to mount a counter-attack with the force available there. While he was discussing his plan with the platoon commander, Adjudant Robert Durot, a new German attack developed. This was the planned subsidiary assault from the east by a platoon of the 12. Kompanie. About 4.30 a.m., with a third of the defenders out of action and the remainder out in the open in their foxholes, Lieutenant Gonnet gave the order to abandon Block East. Those who could jumped and toppled down the steep northern slope.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the mountain, the German reserve platoon had joined the battle and the pressure mounted on Block West. The French were starting to run out of ammunition, losses mounted and at

Left: **In May 1945, the bodies of the French soldiers killed on Mont Froid were carried down and buried in this field beside the cemetery of le Verney hamlet, near Bramans. (Gindre)**

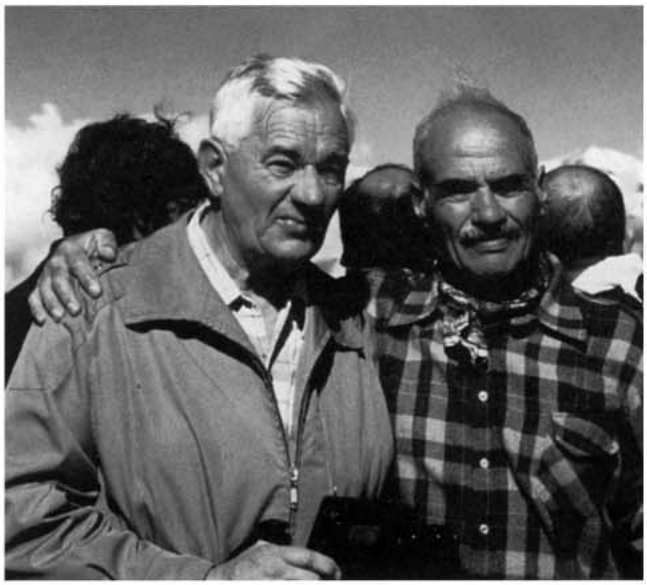
Right: **They were later exhumed and returned to the families concerned and nothing remains to be seen today of these graves. Mont Froid stands in the left background.**

The Germans allowed the French to evacuate their wounded down their own side of Mont Froid but the remainder were taken prisoner and marched to the Mont Cenis plateau. They were then taken to Susa from where they were moved to the PoW camp at Rivalta. On April 28, they overpowered their German guards, mostly aged and dispirited men, taking in turn about 50 prisoner. The Frenchmen then piled into captured vehicles, together with their prisoners, and started off for Turin which they entered next morning, greeted by welcoming shouts of 'de Gaulle!' (Nowak)

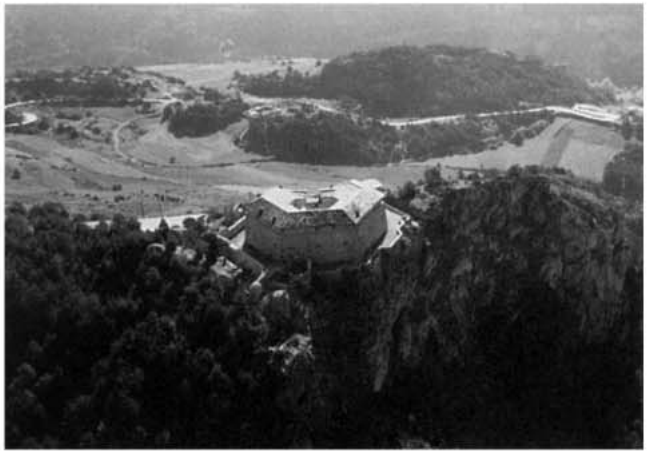
about 7 a.m., in response to a German demand, Sergeant Gabriel Lasnier agreed to surrender. (He had taken over command after the platoon commander, Adjudant Gaston Freyneux, had been grievously wounded by a mortar shell which shattered his arm and toppled him down the northern slope.)

The German mortar and artillery fire then concentrated on Block Centre and with their battle-cry 'Hurrah!', the Jägers assaulted the position. Though they were thrown back with losses, Feldwebel Thiel being one of those killed, the situation soon became untenable for the French, and at 8.15 a.m., the position commander, Aspirant de la Forte, decided to surrender. Mont Froid was German.

The attackers had lost over 50 men, a dozen of them killed. The French had 28 killed, their frozen bodies lying strewn all over the wind-swept summit. Sixty-nine others had been taken prisoner, many of them wounded. In the morning, Red Cross flags were laid out on the top of Mont Froid and the French artillery fire ceased. The Germans agreed to let the French evacuate their wounded down their own side of the mountain after the more grievously wounded had been attended to by a German doctor. The remaining prisoners were marched down the other side to the Mont Cenis plateau, from where they were later moved to the PoW camp at Rivalta, near Turin.



Since the war, the top of Mont Froid had seen numerous veterans meetings. *Left:* Georg Rohleder, was often there, as was Robert Durot, former commander of the French Block East; this picture of them being taken in September 1990. *Right:* Other regular attenders were Alain le Ray, then commanding the 7ème Demi-Brigade, and Franz Roth, then NCO with the 1. Kompanie of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100, seen here together in September 1995. In 1985, three commemorative plaques were placed on the 'historical summits' attacked by the French in April 1945: Mont Froid, Pointe de Bellecombe and Pointe de Clairy. Each of these mentions both the French 7ème Demi-Brigade and the German Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100.



History had often been enacted in the Maurienne valley for it is one of the easiest passages across the Alps between France and Italy. As early as 218 BC, the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca might have passed this way. Planning to invade Italy, he had started out from Spain and crossed the Pyrenees with an army of 90,000 men, 12,000 horses and 34 elephants. He advanced across southern France and crossed the Alps in the autumn. All but seven of his elephants had died during the attempt but he still defeated the Roman armies at Ticinus and Trebia. The following year, he won another major battle at Lake Trasimene and in August 216 BC he was the victor in the now classical battle of Cannae. Experts differ as to precisely which route he took over the Alps but it is most likely he followed one of the rivers which flow into the Rhône from the east. To this day, no definitive proof has been found as to which pass Hannibal took over the Alps but, studying contemporary reports by Polybius (a text written about 70 years after Hannibal's feat) and Titus Livius (nearly 200 years later), the British historian Dr M. A. Lavis-Trafford pointed out that of the various known specifics, only one pass over the Alps fits them all: the Clapier pass up the Savine valley just to the south of the Mont Cenis plateau. As for the first major battle waged for the Mont Cenis, it was fought in 1793 and 1794 when Sardinia declared war on the young French Republic. The French promptly overran the province of Savoy but small battles raged back and forth in the upper Maurienne for two years. The French Général Henri Sarret was killed on the western ridge of Mont Froid on '17 Germinal, An 2' (in the new republican calendar that was March 15, 1794) and a plaque commemorating his death still stands on the ridge that projects to the west of Mont Froid and which today bears his name. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 ordered France to return Savoy to King Victor Emmanuel and to pay a large war indemnity. Spending most of it to fortify their border with France, the Italians built five forts on the Esseillon rock barrier, some distance upstream from Modane, during 1820 to 1833. The largest, the Victor Emmanuel fortress, had 88 gun embrasures and could accomodate 1,500 soldiers in its barracks. Nicely restored (though work is still in progress), this incredible complex of forts is now open to the public, with marked-out paths crossing its huge expanse. *Above left:* This picture shows the Marie-Christine fortress. With Savoy returned to France again in 1860, the French started to fortify their new Alpine frontier. Several forts were built in the upper Maurienne, such as the Replaton and Sappey forts above Modane. Built on a new concept pioneered by Général Raymond Séré de Rivières to take into account the increasing power of artillery, these forts were largely underground. In turn, the Italians built new fortifications to control the Mont Cenis pass and French and Italian forts soon faced each others: la Turra on the French side (see page 15), Ronce *(above right)*, Pattacreuse, Variselle and Malamot on the Italian side. Also, a third generation of fortifications can be seen in the Maurienne: those of the Maginot Line. Of the latter, three major forts were built near Modane: Sappey (on the foundations of the old Séré de Rivières fortress), Saint-Gobain, and Saint-Antoine. Some, such as Saint-Gobain with its four blockhouses just upstream of Modane, can be visited today. Also of interest in the sector is the aeronautical research centre at Avrieux. The largest of the wind tunnels there, S1MA, was seized while still under construction at Otztal in Austria in 1945. Other parts were recovered in various factories across Germany and the huge installation was completed and inaugurated in 1948. Constantly up-dated ever since, it claims to be the largest sonic wind tunnel in the world. (Readers interested in visiting the area should contact the Maurienne Tourist Office, telephone 0033 4 79 05 91 57, fax 0033 4 79 05 80 96.)

THE END

Meanwhile, the French offensive in the southern part of the Alps had continued according to the general plan and the last parts of the Provence still occupied by the Germans had been liberated. By April 23, the 1ère DMI had cleared the Authion sector and reached the Lombarde and Tende passes and the 159ème RIA captured Larche, the entrance to one of the passes to Italy.

On April 24, General Devers approved the plan submitted by Général Doyen four days earlier: that French forces would push down from the Larche and Lombarde passes and press on as far the Cueno sector, thus

The third phase of the French offensive in the Alps began on April 10 when the 1ère DMI assaulted the Authion massif, the key to Italy in the southern Alps. To support the infantry, the division employed a platoon of six M5 light tanks from the

1er Régiment de Fusiliers Marins, the divisional reconnaissance unit, seen here driving up the winding road to the Turini pass. The employment of armour at an altitude of 1900 metres was indeed a première event in itself! (ECPArmées)

April 11, Authion: German prisoners being marched down the same road followed by the tanks. The road can be seen in the background, winding around the flank of the Cime de Tueis, at 1889 metres altitude, the curve pictured *centre* being the one on the left in the shot *above*. The monument on the right is a memorial to the battles fought there in the summer of 1793

when the young French Republic struggled for self-preservation. The French then failed to dislodge the Sardinians from their solid positions on the Authion plateau but the following spring, the Armée d'Italie outflanked them on the coast. The credit for this success was given to the army's artillery chief, a young general by the name of Napoléon Bonaparte. (Leclerc)

Supported by two light tanks, French infantry assault the camp of Cabanes Vieilles, at an altitude of about 1790 metres, on April 11. Comprising a dozen of large buildings for the most part dating from the 19th century, the camp provided barracks for the troops manning the Authion fortresses. (ECPArmées)
Right: **Though some of the camp buildings have been razed to the ground, many still remain almost as they were left in 1945. There are numerous fortresses in this sector of the border, some of them dating from the last century, others of the pre-WWII Maginot plan. The Cabanes Vielles barracks are open to visitors as are the fortresses in the area, such as Plan Caval, Mille Fourches, Trois Communes and la Forca.**

isolating all enemy forces in the southern part of the Alps. Eager to enter Italy in force, Doyen urged his men on the coming operation. While supplies and ammunition were brought up, engineers worked hard to clear the road to the Lombarde pass, 2350 metres high, from snow and to reinforce the small bridges for trucks to pass through.

On the other side of the Alps, following the crossing of the Po river by the Eighth Army on April 24, Armee Ligurien had ordered a general withdrawal to northern Italy. On the southern wing of LXXV. Armeekorps, the 34. Infanterie-Division moved out on April 25, followed next morning by the 5. Gebirgs-Division. The manoeuvre went smoothly, without losses, and by April 30, most the corps' forces were assembled north-east of Turin, in a sector between Biella and Chivasso.

Things were not so easy for the Italian units. The men of the 'Littorio' division (with LXXV. Armeekorps), the 'San Marco' division (with Korps Lombardia), and the 'Monte Rosa' division (in army reserve), were, understandably, less keen to comply with the withdrawal order for they had nowhere to withdraw to. In the weeks to come, they were to suffer the brutal revenge

Then and now. When the battle was over, the photographer took another picture looking in the opposite direction. The road along which the French had attacked is that on the left; a kilometre or so along it stands the monument pictured on page 20. The French infantry and tankers who had assaulted Cabanes Vieilles were all from the Navy as their headgear demonstrates: in spite of numerous orders and threats of punishment, most sailors still went in to battle wearing their traditional 'bachi' with the red pompom instead of the standard steel helmets. (ECPArmées)

The operation continued on April 12 with an attack against the Maginot LIne fortress of Plan Caval. This fort had been hastily constructed since mid-1938 but it was far from complete when war broke out in 1940 and it had only three operational blockhouses with MG embrasures and cupolas. In 1944, the Germans refitted and rearranged Plan Caval to face westwards.

The French attacked in the afternoon, following a strafing attack by fighter-bombers. Three M3 light tanks led the assault, this one firing at Block 4. On the skyline, the observatory cupola of Block 5. Infantry then attacked the strong points with grenades and flame-throwers and the German garrison evacuated the position by the rear entrance. (ECPArmées)

A lone tank then charged up the steep track that led to the old Trois Communes redoubt which crowned the ridge, 2082 metres high. A dozen men followed and the German garrison surrendered. *Left:* The batallion commander, Commandant Edmond Magendie, celebrates his victory in front of the dam-

aged redoubt. (Putigny) *Right:* An easy place to reach in spite of the altitude (about 15 minutes walk from the nearest road), the old redoubt is really worth a visit with beautiful views in every direction; loneliness and silence, with the wind gently rustling the grass and whistling through the gaping walls.

To outflank the Germans still stubbornly holding the Brouis pass, blocking the road to Tende, the French then attacked southwards from the Authion. On April 14, advancing on a winding track at about 1900 metres, a few light tanks of the 1er RFM led the assault by the 2ème Bataillon de la Légion Etrangère (Foreign Legion). The tanks reached la Déa fort, another Maginot line fortress which controlled a crossroad over the mountain ridge. The tanks pounded the casemates for

a while yet there was no reply, but when the Légionnaires moved in, they came under fire. The small German garrison had cleverly taken up positions out in the open, on the heights above the fortress, and had held their fire until the French approached. Although the tanks immediately opened up, it still took the whole day to persuade the German rearguards to withdraw. By the evening, the fortress of la Déa was in French hands. (ECPArmées)

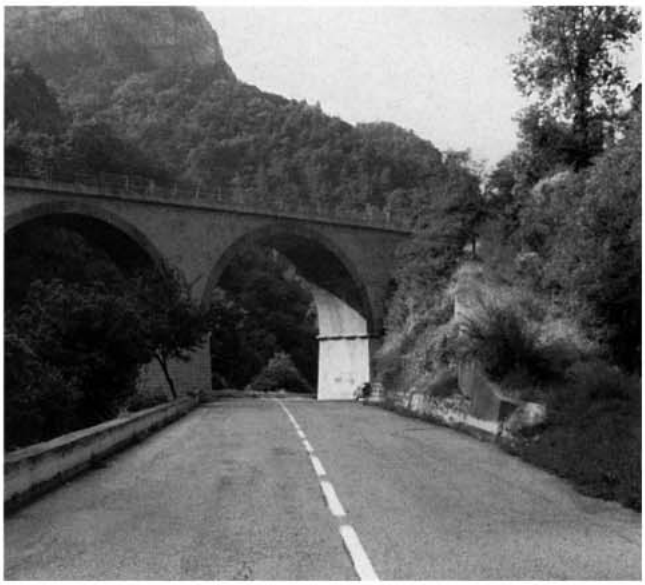
Following the crossing of the River Po by Eighth Army on April 24, Armee Ligurien ordered a general withdrawal to northern Italy. The LXXV. Armeekorps manoeuvered smoothly and by April 30, most of its forces were assembled north-east of Turin. *Left:* **These troops of Gebirgs-Jäger-Regiment 100 were pictured during this move by Hauptmann Eberhardt Pröhl. On the morning of April 29, Generalleutnant Max Pemsel, the Chief-of-Staff of Armee Ligurien, signed a general order: all units under the army command were to surrender to the Allies armies. He is seen here** *(right)* **after the surrender of his army.**

of the Italian partisans, the men being maltreated and many of their officers and NCOs being executed on the spot or after summary arraignment before a 'popular court'.

Due to the poor weather, with rain, snow and fog, the German withdrawal was not noticed by the French forces until early on April 26 when patrols discovered that all the contested positions had been abandoned. The French forces then advanced all along the front in accordance with the plan agreed to by 6th Army Group.

In the north, in really poor weather, elements of the 5ème Demi- Brigade crossed the Rhême pass, 3063 metres, and pushed down into the Aosta valley. Despite opposition from Italian partisans, who made moves to stop them, they advanced as far as Pont-Saint-Martin. Here and there, confrontation with the partisans threatened to develop into real combat. Meanwhile, advancing from the Mont Cenis pass, the leaders of the 15ème BCA had reached Susa and were soon approaching Turin. In the south, having worked hard to clear the two metres of deep snow that blocked the road through the Lombarde pass, the 1ère DMI advanced down into Italy. At the same time, other elements had moved from the Larche and

Meanwhile, in accordance with the plan approved by General Devers, the French advanced into Italy on the heels of the Germans. *Above left:* **Elements of the 6ème BCA crossed the Italian anti-tank barrier that blocked the eastern end of the Mont Cenis plateau.** *Above right:* **An exact comparison is impossible for a new dam has been built at this spot, hence our helicopter shot.** *Below left:* **On their way to Susa, the 6ème BCA negotiated the hairpin bends which take the road down a steep cliff aptly named 'les Echelles' referring to the series of ladders which overcame the barrier in ancient time. (Maréchal)** *Below right:* **Christian Demolis took this almost timeless comparison for us: the N6 road still curving exactly as it did in 1945.**



The French also advanced in the southern Alps. Here, men of the 1ère DMI ascend the Roya valley, in the direction of Cueno via the Tende pass. (ECPArmées) *Right:* **The Germans destroyed so many of the bridges and tunnels as they withdrew that it was not until 1979 that the picturesque railway to the Tende pass could be brought back into service.**

Tende passes and their leaders soon reached Vinadio and approached Cuneo.

Though Devers, the commander of the 6th Army Group, had backed up the French offensive plans in the Alps, General Mark W. Clark, the commander of the 15th Army Group on the other side of the mountains, sharply disagreed. On April 28, he urged the French to stop their advance and to fall back behind the border and out of his zone of operations. The French agreed to stop, but not to withdraw.

On the German side, having lost all contact with his army commander, Marshal Graziani, the Chief-of-Staff of Armee Ligurien, Generalleutnant Max Pemsel, contacted the commander of the US IV Corps, General Willis D. Crittenberger. The two met at Crittenberger's command post in Castiglione during the night of April 28/29. Next morning, Pemsel signed a general order to Armee Ligurien, that in the absence of the army commander, 'considering the uselessness of a breakthrough in the direction ordered and the general situation in Germany,' he ordered to all units under the army command to surrender to the Allied armies. He insisted however that it was out of question to surrender to the partisans. Next morning, having been freed from his prison in Milan by the Americans (he had been captured and jailed by the partisans), Marshal Graziani was flown to Florence where he joined with Generalleutnant Pemsel. He soon confirmed the order to surrender signed by his Chief-of-Staff.

SURRENDER

On April 29, at the headquarters of the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean in Caserta, Oberstleutnant Victor von Schweinitz, representative of Generaloberst Heinrich von Vietinghoff (Commander-in-Chief Südwest since March 10), signed the capitulation of the German forces in Italy (see *After the Battle* No. 48). This capitulation was due to be effective at midday, May 2.

In the terms agreed for the armistice signed in September 1943 by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, only British and American troops were allowed to occupy Italy. Nevertheless, Devers proposed on May 3 to let the French occupy that part of Italy which had been captured by them. To this suggestion, General

Some distance to the north, engineers struggle to clear a route for another battle group of the 1ère DMI to move down into Italy from the 2350-metre-high Lombarde pass, in the direction of Cuneo. (ECPArmées)

Left: **On May 5, 1945, the 29ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Algerians parade along the main street of Tende. (ECPArmées)** *Right:* **Thanks to Mrs Juliette Baldi who kindly permitted us to invade her balcony, Jean Paul took this perfect comparison.**

The small town of Tende lies up the magnificent Roya valley. We recommend travelling there by train from Nice as the line is very picturesque, passing an incredible series of viaducts and tunnels.

Sir Harold Alexander, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean, refused, pointing out that the presence of French troops in Italy was 'highly undesirable'. He urged Devers to intervene so that the French complied with the withdrawal demand made by 15th Army Group. He also sent Italian troops to Tende and Ventimiglia to reaffirm the sovereignty of Italy in these districts.

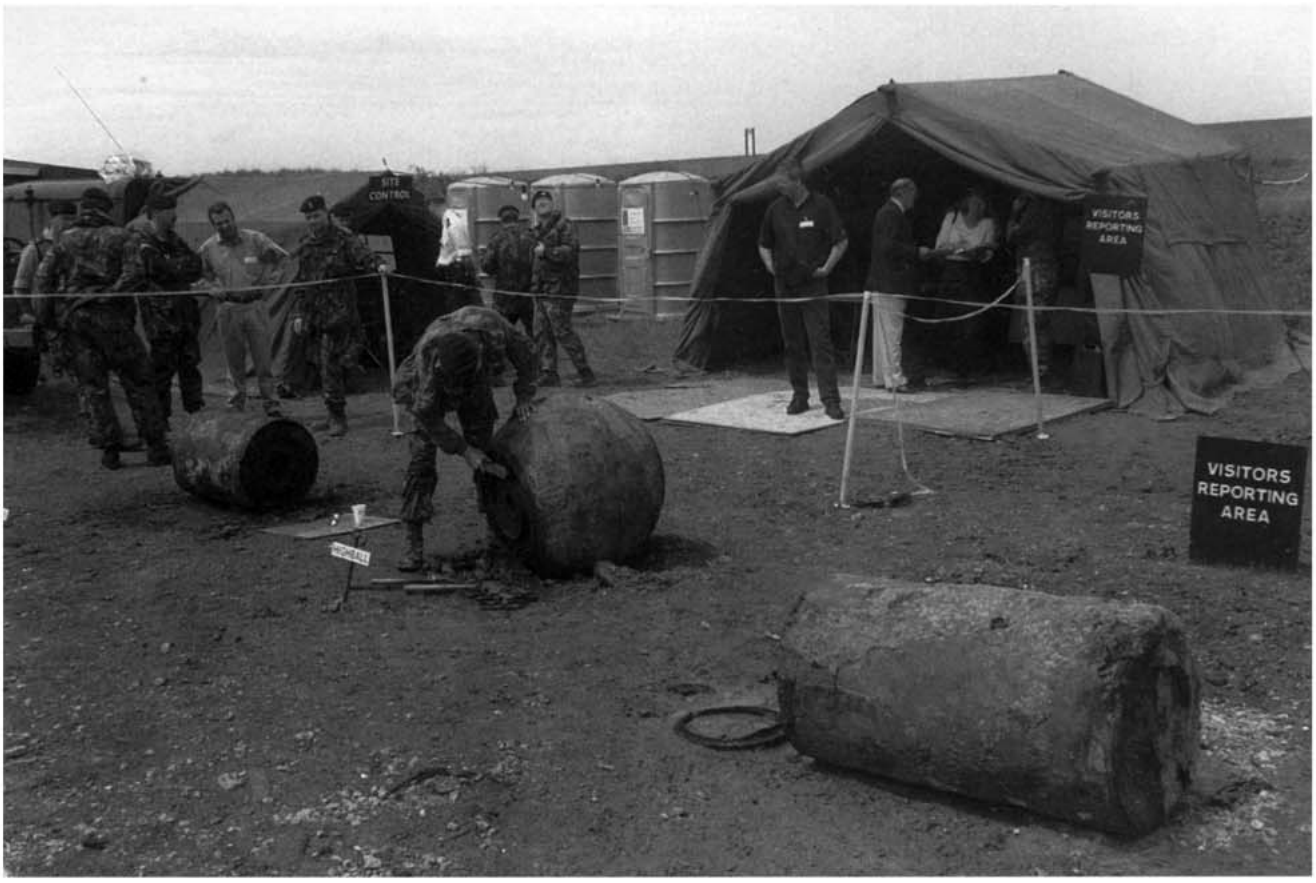
Tensions increased between Général Doyen and General Crittenberger, Doyen writing that he was prepared to uphold his refusal to withdraw 'to the bitter end', but the British were not prepared to compromise. They were at that time manoeuvring to oust the French from Syria, a former French mandate, and reasoned that if the French achieved their object in Italy, they might stiffen their attitude in Syria too. Churchill implored Truman to be steadfast and at the beginning of June, the US President wrote to de Gaulle, referring to the uproar caused by Doyen and threatened to cut all supplies to France, except food. In his answer, de Gaulle pointed out that he was being asked to simply give up French-speaking areas freed by French soldiers.

On June 8, Général Alphonse Juin, the commander of the French forces in Italy, went to Alexander's headquarters at Caserta to try to resolve the issue. After three days of discussion, the French agreed to withdraw behind the frontier line of 1939 and their units fell back progressively from June 20, the last part of contested territory being vacated on July 10.

On February 10, 1947, Italy signed a peace treaty in Paris. Albania, formerly an Italian mandate, became independent; the town of Zara and the province of Istria, less the town of Triestre, were ceded to Yugoslavia and the Dodecanese to Greece. Few of France's claims, however, were granted. The contested areas remained Italian, to the despair of the French-speaking population. However, several minor corrections were made, mostly to give the French better defence positions against possible attacks from Italy. At the Petit-Saint-Bernard pass, the border was shifted eastwards by a few hundred metres, and at the Mont Cenis pass, the entire plateau was turned over to France. South of Mont Thabor, the Vallée Etroite and the Thures pass were also ceded to France as were the Chaberton summit and its fort to the north-east of Briançon. Further south, in the Tinée and Vésubie valleys, the frontier, which previously ran alongside the mountains, was moved to the line of the summits, with both countries to retain joint control of the Lombarde pass.

Only in the Roya valley, about 40 kilometres from the sea, did the correction give France any territorial gain: here too, the frontier was shifted to the summit line, on either side of the Tende pass, which transferred Tende, la Brigue and a few hamlets to French territory, areas which had been artificially severed from Savoie when it joined France in 1860, because the Italian King Emmanuel I refused to part with his hunting grounds there.

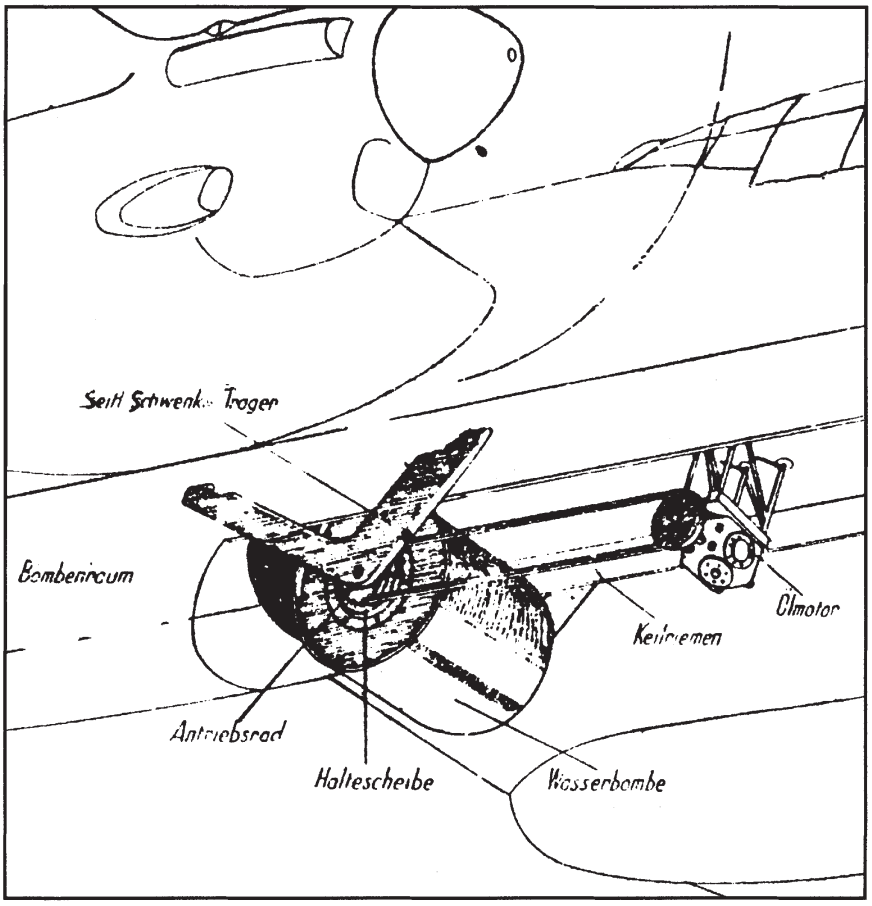
Left: **Général Doyen, the commander of the Détachement d'Armée des Alpes, attended the parade and was pictured in front of Tende's war memorial. In the middle, Général Pierre Garbay, the commander of the 1ère DMI. Both men were bitterly disappointed that, for political reasons, they had to withdraw those of their forces which had reached Cueno instead of pushing them on to Turin.** *Right:* **The Tende sector was eventually to return to France, which was not the case for Aosta where the ski-scouts platoon of the 13ème BCA paraded on May 15. On the right, Sous-Lieutenant Antoine Lissner, the platoon commander, and in the centre, Caporal Sylvain Chinal who climbed Mont Froid with us in 1996. (ECPArmées and Lissner)**



DAMBUSTERS' BOMBS RECOVERY

Following the publication of our feature on the attack on the Ruhr Dams in issue No. 3 of *After the Battle* in 1973, the late Peter Cornish (see issue 85) proposed that an attempt should be made to recover some of Barnes Wallis' unique 'bouncing' bombs which still lay on the Kent foreshore where they had been dropped during pre-raid practice by No. 617 Squadron in 1943. The revolutionary bombs code-named 'Upkeeps' — more correctly described as mines as they were fitted with three modified hydrostatic depth-charge pistols and a self-destruct delay fuze — were developed and tested in the incredibly short period of just over eight weeks by Dr Barnes Wallis of Vickers Armstrongs (Aircraft) Ltd. Scaled-down versions and full-size replicas filled with concrete were dropped on the bombing range at Reculver, as were Wallis's spherical 'High-ball' versions designed to attack shipping.

In all, some 50 Upkeeps were manufactured by Vickers at their Barrow works of which 19 were carried by specially-modified Lancasters on the raid on the night of May 16/17, 1943. Five were dropped against the Möhne dam which was destroyed; three against the Eder which was also destroyed; two on the Sorpe which was damaged and one on the Ennepe causing slight damage. One aircraft lost its Upkeep over the IJsselmeer (the old Zuider Zee) on the way in and five were lost with aircraft being shot down or crashing. Another two Lancasters returned with their bombs intact after suffering flak damage.



The only definitive plans which now exist of Barnes Wallis's bouncing bombs — code-named 'Upkeeps' — are those which were produced by the Germans based on a captured specimen.

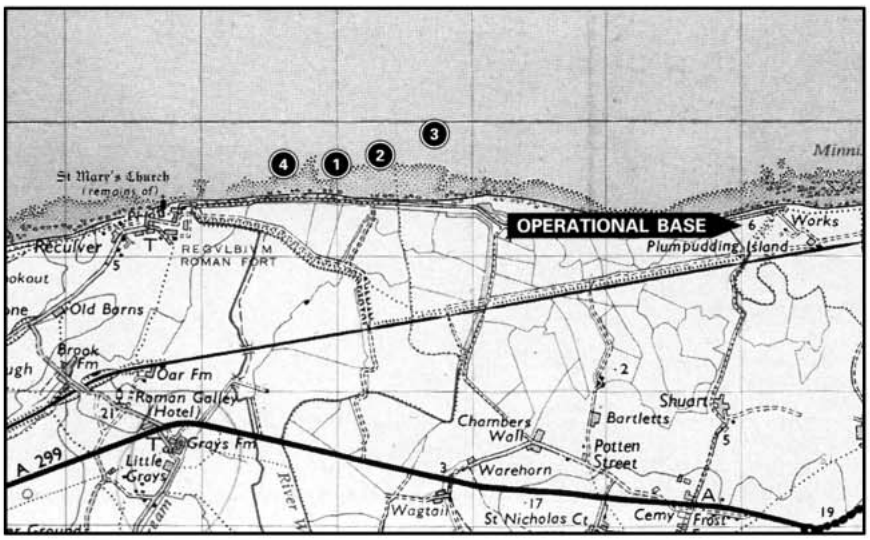
The 'britische Rotations-Wasserbombe' recovered came from Lancaster AJ-E (ED 927) flown by Flight Lieutenant Robert Barlow. It was one of the five aircraft in the second wave and had been briefed to attack the Sorpe dam (see *After the Battle* 82, page 48), and was actually the first aircraft to take off on Operation 'Chastise' — the attack on the Ruhr dams — at 2128 hours on May 16, 1943. At 2350 hours it crashed at Haldern having believed to have hit high-tension wires. The Upkeep failed to explode on impact and the self-destruct mechanism — armed when the weapon detached from the bomb-bay — also failed to operate. It was examined by German naval technicians who identified it correctly as a 'revolving depth-charge'. Within two months, a detailed report had been produced, complete with drawings (see *overleaf*).

Amazingly, the Upkeep on one of the Dambuster aircraft which struck power cables near Haldern en route to the target failed to explode and within a few days the Germans had defuzed it and discovered how it worked. Detailed drawings were produced and it is believed that a bouncing bomb, code-named 'Kurt', was manufactured in Germany although it is known that it was never used. Nevertheless, the German technical drawings of Upkeep appear to be the only definitive ones that now exist and the same are used today by the Royal Engineers' bomb disposal organisation!

In April 1975, following up Peter Cornish's suggestion, Malcolm Ilott led a team from the Rayleigh branch of the British Sub-Aqua Club in the recovery of four specimens with the help of a USAF Sikorsky HH53 to lift the Upkeeps off the beach (see *After the Battle* No. 10). Twenty years later, Andrew Hemsley of the Invicta Military Vehicle Society — hosts of the annual rally at Beltring near Paddock Wood, Kent — proposed that a follow-up operation should recover the remaining bombs for preservation.

Living close to Reculver, Andrew, together with Nigel Hay, had plotted the positions of Upkeeps, and had also located a Highball as well as two of the scaled-down versions of the Upkeeps. At the 1996 Beltring rally, Andrew sat down with Captain Sandy Sanderson, MBE, of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technical Information Centre, to see if a recovery operation could be undertaken as a training exercise. The idea found favour with Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Murfin, the commanding officer of 101 Engineer Regiment (EOD) (Territorial Army), the second of Britain's two home-based Royal Engineers bomb disposal units (the other being 33 Engineer Regiment (EOD)), in that it would provide a unique training opportunity enabling the regiment to exercise both its combat engineer and bomb disposal skills; it would also be a good demonstration of the ability of the reserve forces (i.e. the TA); and it was felt that as the weapons were a unique part of the United Kingdom's military history, they should be recovered for the benefit of future generations.

One of the locations in Britain used to test and develop the Upkeep and its sister — the 'Highball' — was at Reculver on the north Kent coast where several weapons still lay scattered on the beach where they had been dropped in 1943. (See also *After the Battle* No. 25, page 17.)



Andrew Hemsley plotted their positions before approaching the Royal Engineers to propose their recovery. Scaled Upkeeps [1] and [2]; Upkeep [3]; Highball [4].

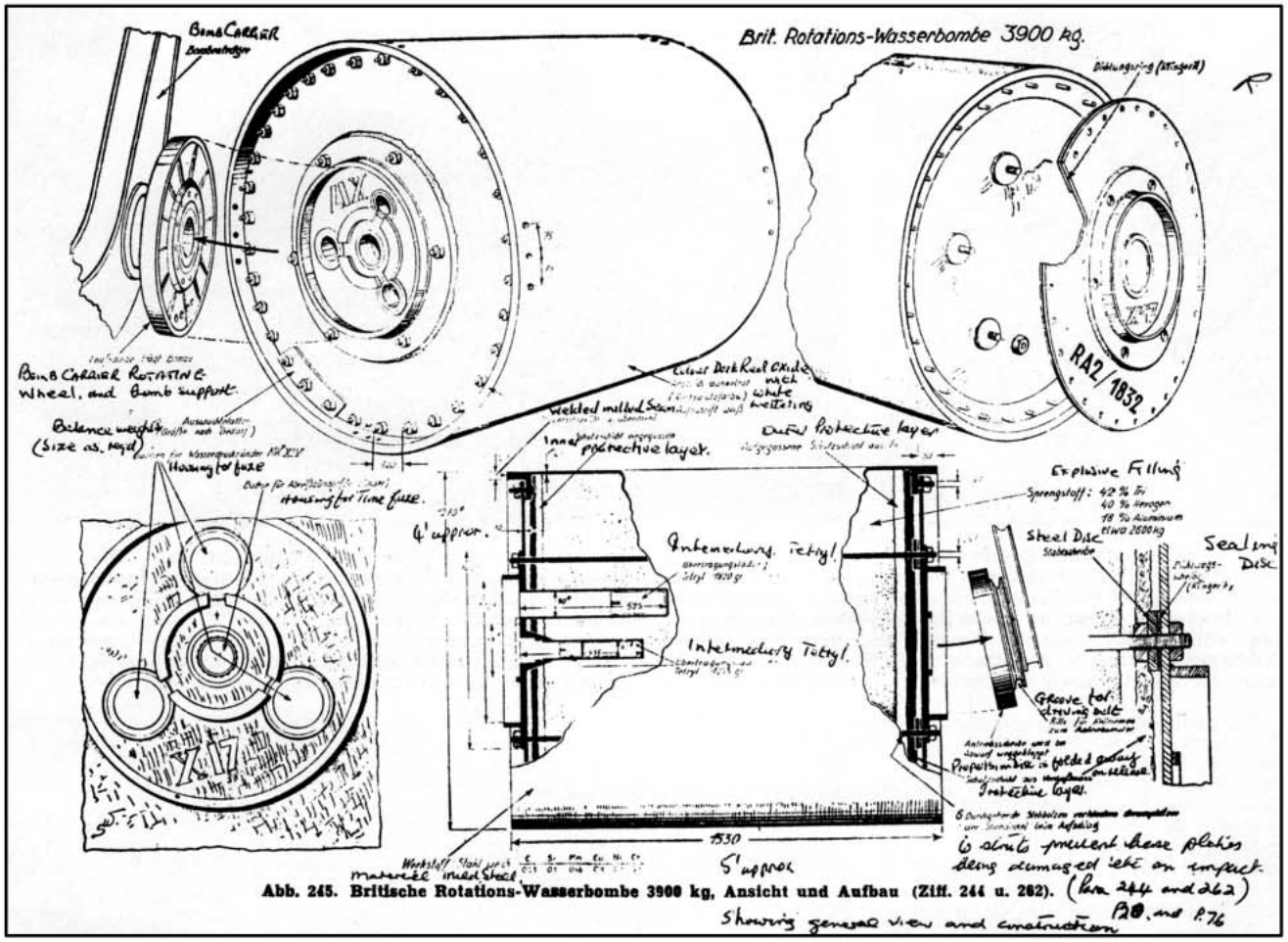


Abb. 245. Britische Rotations-Wasserbombe 3900 kg, Ansicht und Aufbau (Ziff. 244 u. 262). (See 244 and 262)
P.20 and P.76

Fifty years later, Royal Engineers' bomb disposal personnel still use the same German drawings for the technical specifications of the Upkeeps. Also discovered on the beach at Reculver, were several scaled-down versions and a spherical Highball.

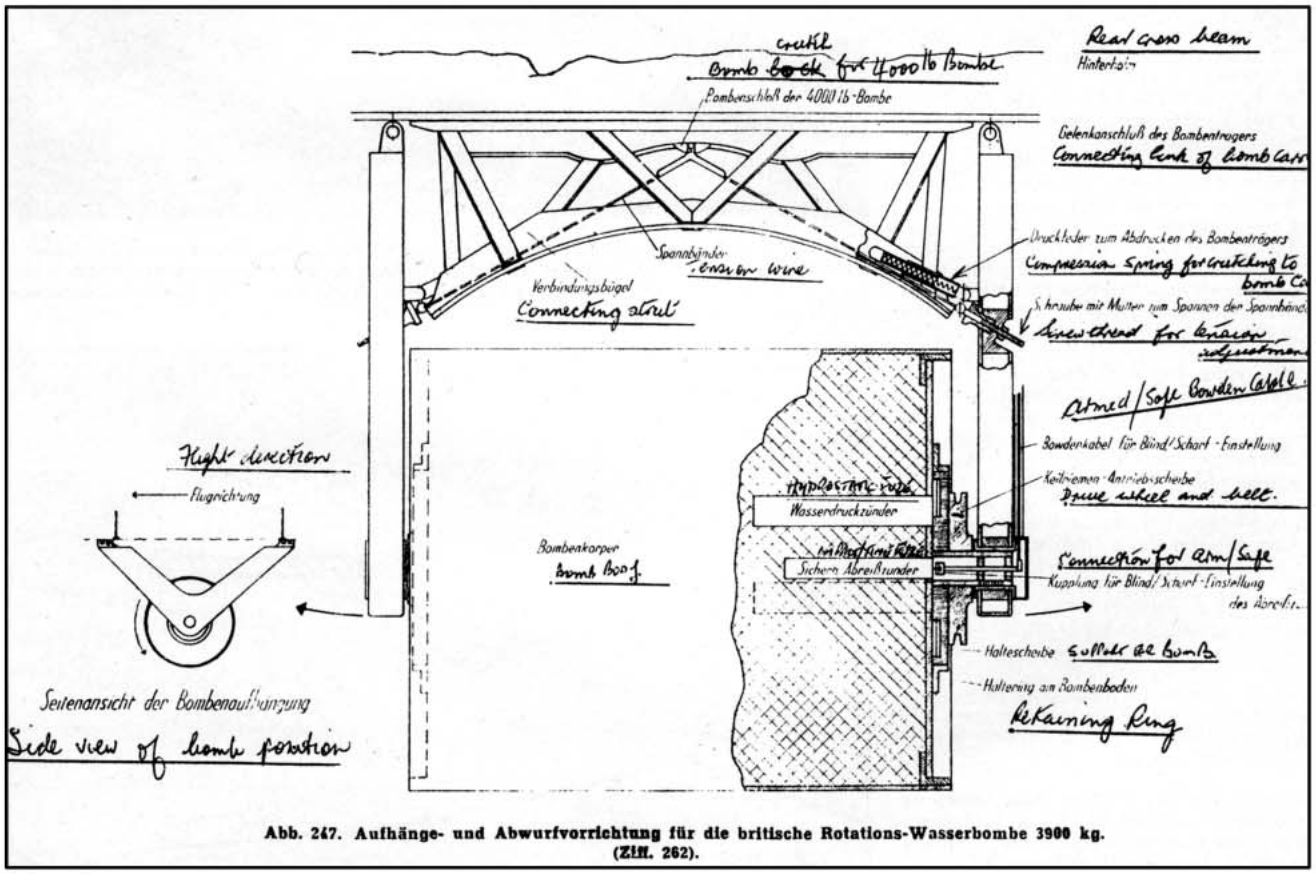


Abb. 247. Aufhänge- und Abwurfvorrichtung für die britische Rotations-Wasserbombe 3900 kg. (Ziff. 262).

Detailed for the operation were 221 Field Squadron (EOD)(V) based at Rochester, Kent; 222 Squadron (EOD)(V) based at Dartford in Kent, and 223 Headquarters Squadron (EOD)(V) co-located with Regimental Headquarters at Catford in south London. All the men and women taking part were volunteer soldiers and, while some had previous regular army service, most had served solely in the Territorial Army. A number of new recruits were also to join the operation.

The project commander was Major Ian Stanton, the OC of 221 Squadron, as joint controller; task commanders were Captain Andy Wood and Staff Sergeant Phil Davis.

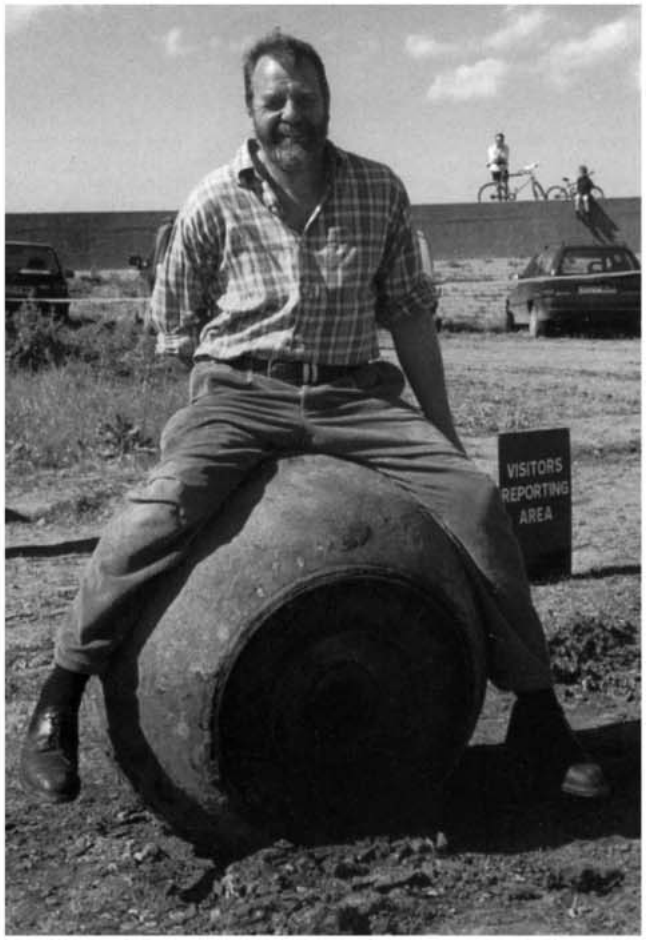
The Upkeeps used against the dams weighed 9,250lbs and contained 6,600lbs of RDX-based explosive. The practice weapons were of a similar weight, i.e. four tons, and, although believed inert, it could not be guaranteed that the detonator pockets were safe from explosives.

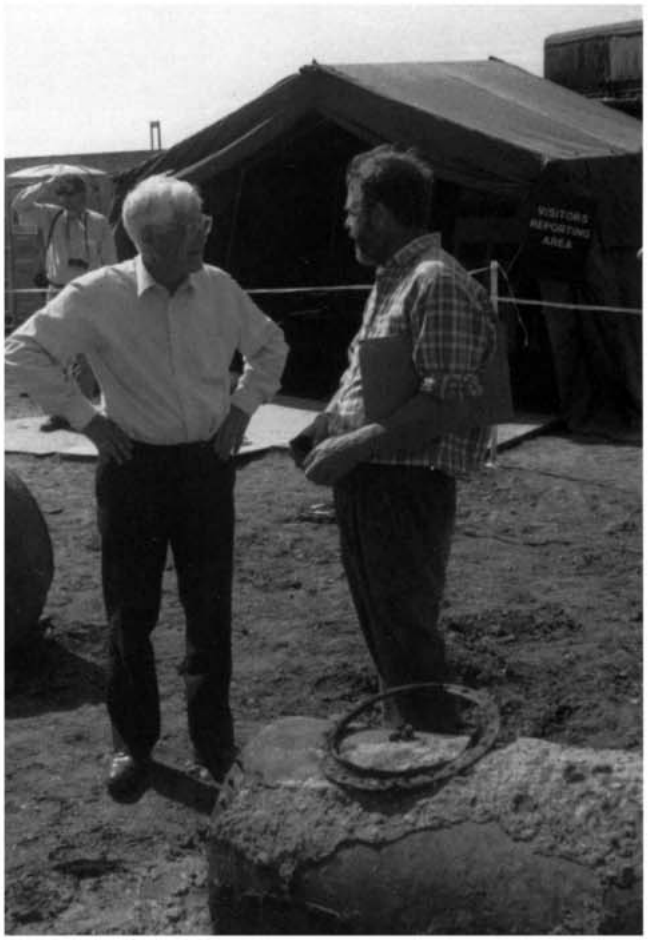
Based on Andrew's research, a reconnaissance of the beach determined which should be recovered. *Left:* **One of the small half-ton Upkeeps;** *right:* **the Highball.**

After preliminary reconnaissance of the various bombs during November 1996, a plan was produced for the recovery of four: two miniatures, one approximately 40 inches long and 22 inches in diameter, the other 28 inches by 21 inches; a Highball some 30 inches in diameter, all believed to weigh about 500 kgs (half a ton) each; and one full-size Upkeep. Measuring five feet long and four feet in diameter, the latter lay over 300 metres offshore and could only be reached at a low spring tide. Even then, there would only be a 'window' of a maximum of two hours before the tide turned and covered it.

The TA units arrived to set up base camp near Plum Pudding Island on Friday, June 6, the exercise being code-named 'Mona Lisa'. That evening, one of the small Upkeeps and the Highball were recovered, the second scaled Upkeep being removed from the beach early on Saturday. These recovered weapons provided a suitable backdrop at base camp when the main Press contingents arrived during the morning. Several television stations set up satellite links with the media clamouring to interview Barnes Wallis's son who arrived on site during Saturday afternoon.

Below left: **A jubilant Andrew on D-Day following the recovery of the Highball on Exercise 'Mona Lisa' — rather fittingly scheduled for June 6, 1997.** *Below right:* **Andrew discusses the unique operation of the weapons with Barnes Wallis Junior. (His late-father had visited Reculver for the first time since the war in 1976 — see *After the Battle* No. 31, page 49.)**





Major Nigel Francis, OC 222 Squadron (EOD)(V), the Joint Project Controller, explains the recovery operation to Barnes Junior.

Andrew Hemsley had already promised that the Highball would go to the Mosquito Aircraft Museum at Salisbury Hall at London Colney as this weapon was developed primarily to be dropped by Mosquitos. One of the small Upkeeps was earmarked for display locally at Reculver and the other possibly for RAF Scampton, wartime home of No. 617 Squadron. At that point, a home had not been decided for the full-size Upkeep, still to be recovered, but Barnes Wallis Junior quickly laid claim to it for the Barnes Wallis Trust display at the Yorkshire Air Museum, a request to which Andrew promptly acceded.

Further operations on Saturday had to wait for the next low tide which was due at 8 p.m. that evening. A mile west from the base camp, dozens of spectators gathered along the sea-wall opposite the spot where the weapon lay partially exposed. Engineers entered the water before the tide had fully

Too many times these days, the media tends to judge yesterday's history by today's standards, and the members of the large press contingent did little to endear themselves to the son of the great man. *Left:* **'Do you think we should have destroyed the dams?' 'How do you think your father would have felt about today's events?' asked one interviewer. 'How the hell should I know', retorted Barnes Junior, becoming evermore exasperated by the inane questioning.** *Right:* **Then it was the turn of the photographers who wanted the sappers to pose in a variety of undignified positions.**

Even before the tide had receded, sappers were wading out on Saturday evening to prepare to recover the full-size Upkeep.

However, as the sun sank beneath the horizon, operations had to be aborted until Sunday, much to the disappointment of the crowd of onlookers on the sea-wall.

receded to begin to dig under the Upkeep to secure lifting tackle prior to winching it up the beach. However, as darkness fell and the tide returned, it was decided to halt further work until the following morning.

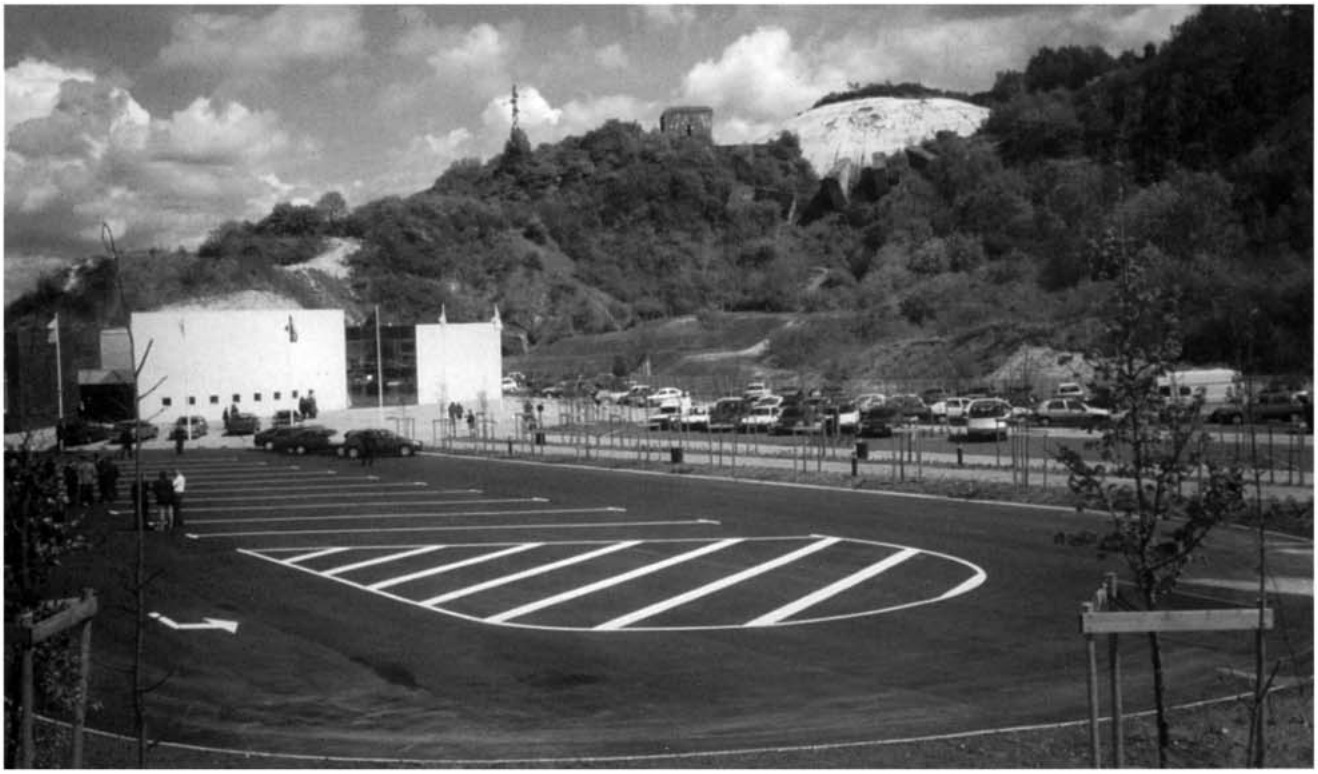
Sunday dawned bright and clear with minimal sea conditions and by 5 a.m. the sappers were already wading out with the tide, low water coming around 8 a.m. Ground anchors were secured and the Upkeep freed from its watery grave. However it quickly became a race against the incoming tide and a decision was taken to bring down a 3-inch rope and physically manhandle the mine up the beach by parbuckling. Once it reached the shingle, a bulldozer pulled it the last few yards to where a crane on the sea-wall hoisted it onto a Bedford truck for transportation to the Defence EOD School at Chattenden.

All the bombs had been inspected on the beach by Captain Sandy Sanderson and the attendant RAF SNCO, Flight Sergeant 'Baz' Jenner, and declared safe from explosives. In fact, the three pistol pockets on the large Upkeep, where the fuzes would have been fitted, were found to be welded up. Free From Explosive Certificates were issued for all the weapons which were then displayed at the Beltring Invicta Rally at the end of July before each was despatched to its new home.

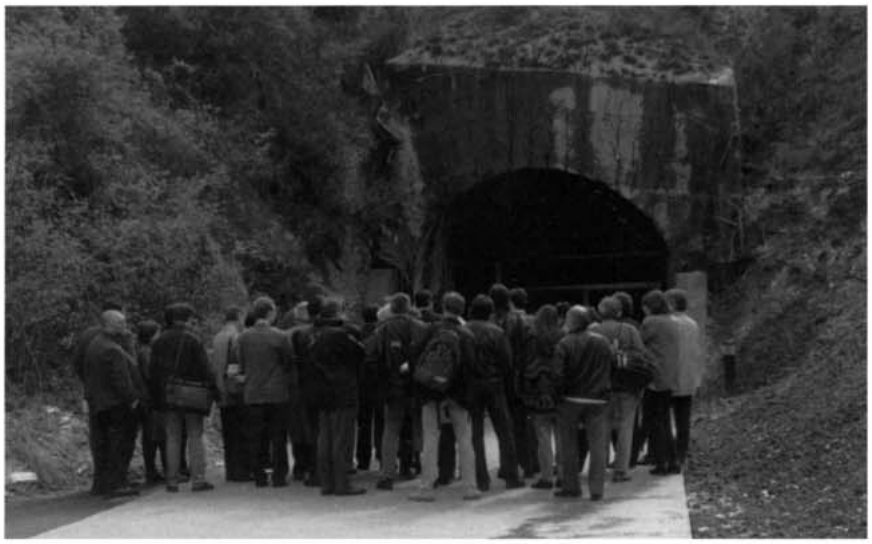
Success came the following day with the four-ton monster being manhandled bodily up the beach. (Royal Engineers)

WIZERNES OPENS TO THE PUBLIC

On May 9, 1950, the first step in the post-war reconciliation between France and Germany was taken with the inauguration of the European Coal and Steel Community — a body which eventually led to the development of the European Economic Community. Along the way, other nations — former enemies and neutrals included — have joined what has now become the European Community (EC). Subsequently, May 9 was declared Europe Day and, in the politically-correct atmosphere which has surreptitiously crept into our lives in recent years, even the opening of the long-awaited V2 rocket bunker at Wizernes near Saint-Omer (see *After the Battle* No. 6) was scheduled for Europe Day in 1996, and turned into a 'source of progress and co-operation between nations, especially in Europe', all of which seems a far cry from its intended rôle as a site for launching V2s against London!



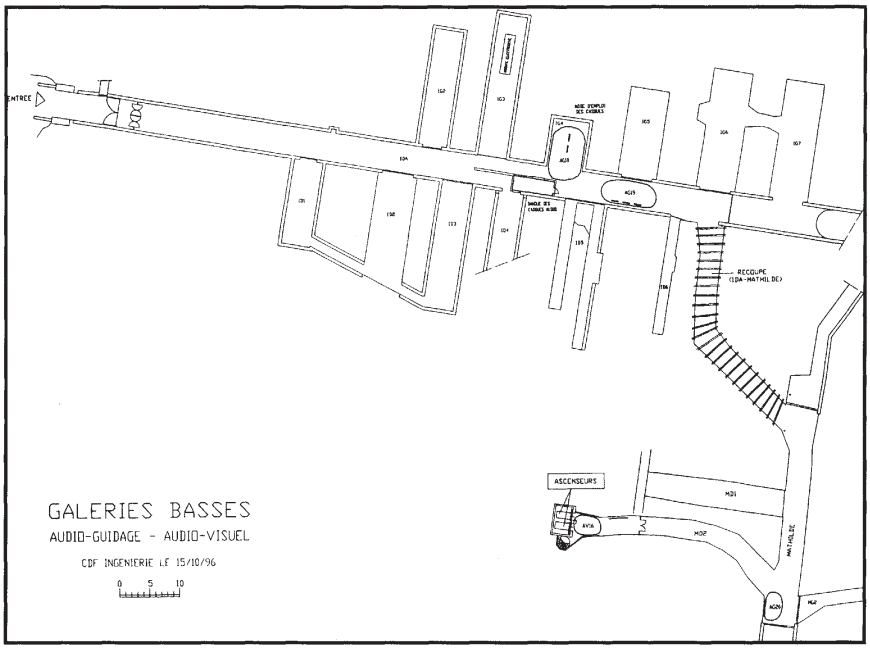
Ten years after the inauguration of the proposal to open up the V2 launch complex at Wizernes near St Omer in northern France, the project has finally come to fruition. In the interim, some £7.5 million has been spent in partially completing what the Germans originally began in October 1943. Photo *(top)* **shows the quarry site with its massive bomb-proof concrete dome on the cliff-top as we pictured it in 1974;** *above:* **the same view in 1997.**



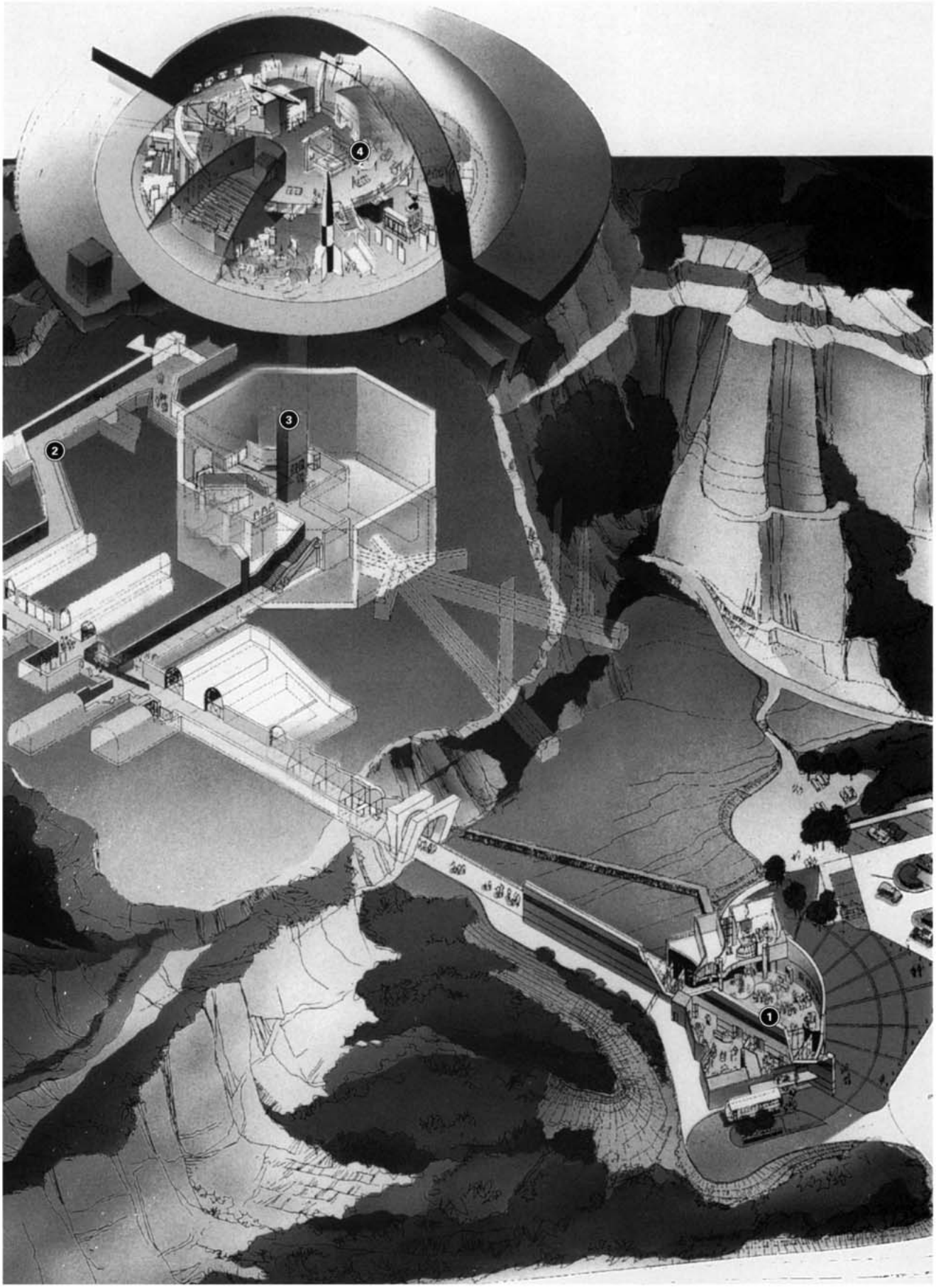
Then . . . and now. A party of journalists enter the main tunnel which in 1974 could be seen virtually as it had been abandoned in 1944.

This politicisation was reinforced at the launch (pardon the pun) by the inclusion of a modern Ariane rocket display to 'highlight the European part of the present-day peaceful conquest of space', making one feel that the history was being subtly manipulated to accord with current political thinking. This was an aspect which your Editor personally found somewhat disturbing, particularly as La Coupole, as the bunker has now been named, is billed as an educational experience for the younger generation who are offered 'a surprising journey from the dark years to the light years'.

A number of journalists attending the Press day on May 9, 1997 were also sceptical that what we were being shown had really been achieved for the stated expenditure of 69 million francs (£7.5 million). Nearly half this sum (35 million FF) had been provided by the authorities in the Pas-de-Calais with the regional council contributing a further 17 million FF. Another 12 million FF came from EC funds (hence the need to portray the bunker in a positive educational light), the balance being put up by the French State (3 million FF) and 1 million FF by the Saint-Omer Urban District. The misgivings voiced by the Press were possibly explained in the small print of the press release which stated that the amounts given were 'after tax'; perhaps also the reason why there are a number of private shareholders involved.



Unfortunately, ill health prevented both Professor R. V. Jones and Werner Flos, the Chief Engineer of Organisation Todt responsible for the construction, who had met each other for the first time on the site in June 1987, from attending the opening of 'La Coupole', so named after its protective dome — the brainchild of Herr Flos — which protected the workings.



Up until 1993, the quarry and associated workings were owned by M. Pierre Macquart (apart from its brief tenure by the OT), but it then became the property of the Commune de Helfaut (the local council) until taken over by the Conseil Général du Pas-de-Calais in 1994. As well as constructing the reception building in the quarry [1], the main conversion work entailed cutting a linking gallery [2]; installation of a lift [3]; and the addition of a mezzanine floor and a cinema beneath the dome [4].

From the ground level *(left)*, a lift *(right)* transports visitors to the large exhibition area beneath the bomb-proof dome *(below)*. Apart from the V1 and V2, audio-visual presentations, animated models and documentary films tell the story of the German secret weapons; the people's life in northern France during the occupation; and the post-war conquest of space.

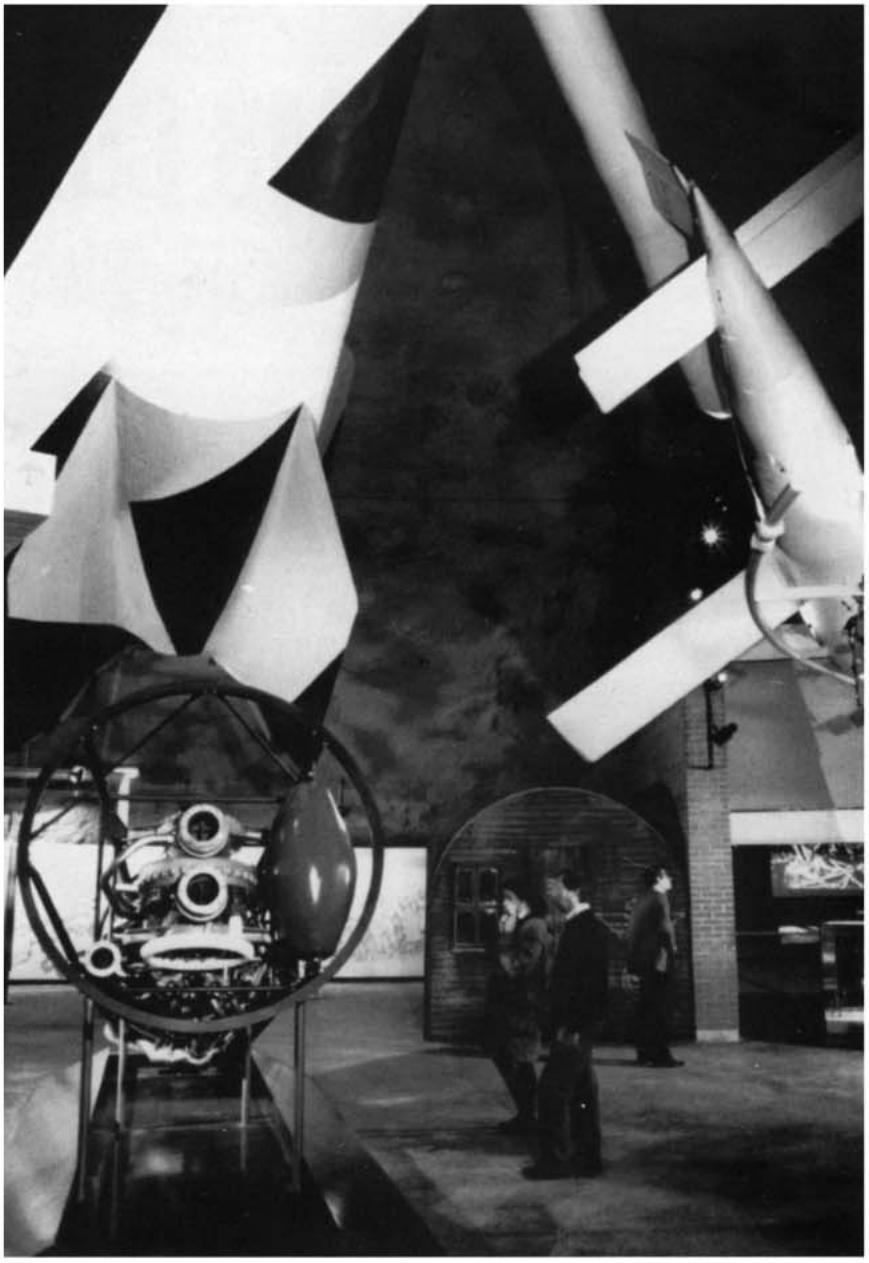
That said, the transformation achieved at Wizernes in two years is unbelievable. Having visited and photographed the German workings in the quarry back in 1974, when it could be seen just as it had been left in 1945, and later in 1987 when we took Professor R. V. Jones to personally inaugurate the project to open the complex to the public (see *After the Battle* No. 57), the change is extremely impressive.

From where we left the story in 1987, local historian Yves le Maner was entrusted with taking the project forward by developing the conception of turning Wizernes into a museum site while, at the same time, a feasability study was conducted into the technical problems of partially completing the work which the Organisation Todt under Werner Flos had begun in 1943. Apart from constructing the colossal bomb-proof dome 71 metres (233 feet) in diameter and five metres (16½ feet thick) on the cliff top to protect the workings, seven kilometres (4½ miles) of underground tunnels had been excavated by migrant labourers before Allied bombing forced the Germans to abandon the site.

By 1993, the authorities in the Pas-de-Calais had approved the project and development was contracted to the Societé d'Equipement du Pas-de-Calais. Work began two years later to excavate a further two metres beneath the dome, clear out and concrete some of the tunnels, build an exhibition centre, and fit out the whole with the latest audio-visual presentations. Headsets working from infra-red trigger points allow visitors to hear a commentary in a choice of four languages: English, French, Dutch and German.

A lift shaft cut through the solid rock connects the ground floor with the huge vault excavated beneath the protective dome which now contains a V1, obtained from the Science Museum in London, and a V2 provided by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

It is hoped to open up more of the tunnels in due course as the ambitious plans for La Coupole's future develop. As one of the few 'museums' in northern France, with a catchment area extending into Belgium and Holland, it is anticipated that by the end of the decade, upwards of 200,000 visitors will be visiting Wizernes each year. Present admission prices are adults 55FF (approximately £6) with children 40F. La Coupole is open every day, all the year round, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. from April to October and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. from November to March.



HMS COLLINGWOOD

By Paul Mayo

HMS *Collingwood*, currently designated a 'Naval Training Establishment', is responsible for training Weapon Engineering and Warfare Branch personnel from raw recruit to officer level. It was built near Fareham in Hampshire as a New Entry Training Establishment for 'Special Reserve' ratings of the Seaman branch. When war came in 1939, they became 'Hostilities Only' ratings.

The shore establishment was named after Admiral Lord Collingwood, second-in-command to Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. When Nelson succumbed to his wounds, Admiral Collingwood assumed command of the victorious British fleet, having transferred his flag from the badly damaged HMS *Royal Sovereign* to HMS *Euryalus*. On his return to England, he was raised to the peerage in recognition of his service to his country.

A derelict farm called Mettic's Barn totalling 197 acres along Newgate Lane (the B3385 between Fareham and Lee-on-Solent), and to the south of Fort Fareham, was purchased early in 1939 for £7,751 for construction of the new training establishment. Although it swallowed up what was regarded by some as the best acres of corn field in south Hampshire, and by others as the best snipe marsh in the country, much of the land was waterlogged and any single-storey brick building needed a concrete raft four times its floor area to support it. To this day, drainage pumps work continuously to prevent flooding in low-lying areas of the establishment.

In spite of the transfer of the title to the Admiralty, the War Office still retained the right, under the Clearance Rights Act of 1854, to flatten everything within the arcs of fire of Fort Fareham. This threat to the very existence of *Collingwood* remained until the creation of the unified Ministry of Defence in April 1964.

This is the story of a wartime naval training establishment: HMS *Collingwood* at Fareham in Hampshire on the outskirts of Portsmouth — traditional home of the Royal Navy. Consisting largely of temporary wooden buildings, it was hastily built in 1939 to cater for the coming emergency and designed to turn out 1,000 ratings per week. *Top:* **The station was commissioned on December 18, 1939 with Rear-Admiral Cyril Sedgewick as commanding officer.** *Above:* **The wartime picture was taken in front of the Wardroom, since demolished, which stood on Nile Road ([1] on plan on page 42).**

Building work started immediately and the camp grew out of the marsh as 311 buildings, most of them wooden huts, were erected at a total cost of £11,000. The camp was divided into four identical groupings, originally designated Forecastle (FX), Fore-top (FT), Main-top (MT) and Quarterdeck (AX) Divisions in traditional naval fashion, and centred around the largest parade ground in any naval establishment. Fore-top Division was the odd one out as it was built entirely of brick, probably due to a shortage of timber. An administrative, supply and recreational area lay between the training area and the main gate on Newgate Lane, consisting of officers' accommodation, pay office, stores (slop alley), cinema, church and sick bay which was rated as a Naval Hospital with a Surgeon Rear-Admiral in charge. It was all heated by nine boiler houses, each with three or four civilian stokers, and in freezing conditions (the winter of 1939-40 was particularly hard), pickaxe parties were detailed to break up the frozen coal.

Each block was designed to cater for 2,500, with each hut able to accommodate 36 men. The planned weekly intake was a thousand recruits, starting a ten-week course, so that at any one time there would be 10,000 trainees under instruction. In addition to its own staff and trainee accommodation, each block possessed a gymnasium, drill shed, galley, dining hall, boats, davits and other training aids. Each gym had its own water tank across which every new entry had to flounder wearing his inflatable lifebelt, in which it was hoped he would gain some confidence in the water, an important factor considering the number of ships sunk later in the war. The range of training facilities was completed by the provision of a battleship's capstan and two cable (anchor chain) holders used by all four divisions as an introduction to ship's forecastle work at the western end of the parade ground, and gun batteries in three large buildings across the road. The first item of training equipment was a condemned whaler from the boat house in Portsmouth Dockyard.

The Wardroom (Officers' Mess) under construction. A new replacement was erected on the eastern edge of the parade ground in 1975.

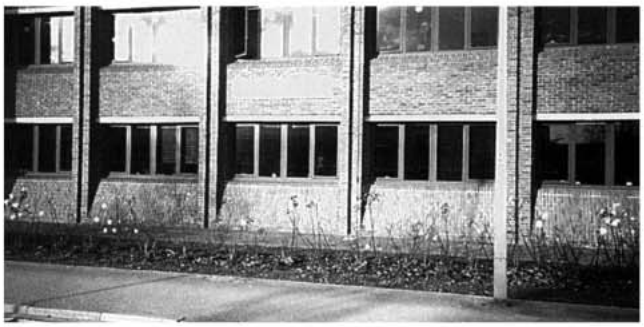
Above: **Trafalgar Road (N) ([2] on plan) in 1939. On the left are the barbers', tailors' and cobblers' shops.** *Below:* **The rearmost victualling store (not visible in the misty background of the wartime photo) still survives at the end of what was known as 'Slop Alley', slops being naval terminology for uniform clothing — not garbage!**

The establishment was commissioned as HMS *Collingwood* on December 18, 1939 under the command of a retired officer, Rear-Admiral C. G. Sedgewick, in the lower rank of Commodore (2nd Class). His staff included Captain L. H. Bayley as Chief-of-Staff and Commander C. A. Kershaw as Executive Officer.

Left: **Looking east from Anson Road (S) towards the main gate [3] in the autumn of 1939. The cinema [4] is under construction on the right with the foundations for the church [5] in the foreground.** *Right:* **Both buildings still survive.**

The heart of any training base: the parade ground [6]. *Left:* This view was taken looking north-west during the hectic construction phase. The skeleton building seen on the left is the FX (Forecastle) Drill Shed [7]. *Right:* Today the western end of the parade ground — where the hockey pitch [8] was laid out during the war — has been built over.

***Collingwood* photographed in 1941-42 showing the radar section (SS on plan) still under construction.**



Lamp-posts about to be erected around the parade ground — they were only removed in the late 1970s. Behind on the left down Port Watch Road is one of the huts destroyed in the bombing raid on June 18, 1943. The bomb exploded on Hut 15 [9] severely damaging the adjacent huts and killing 31 ratings under training.

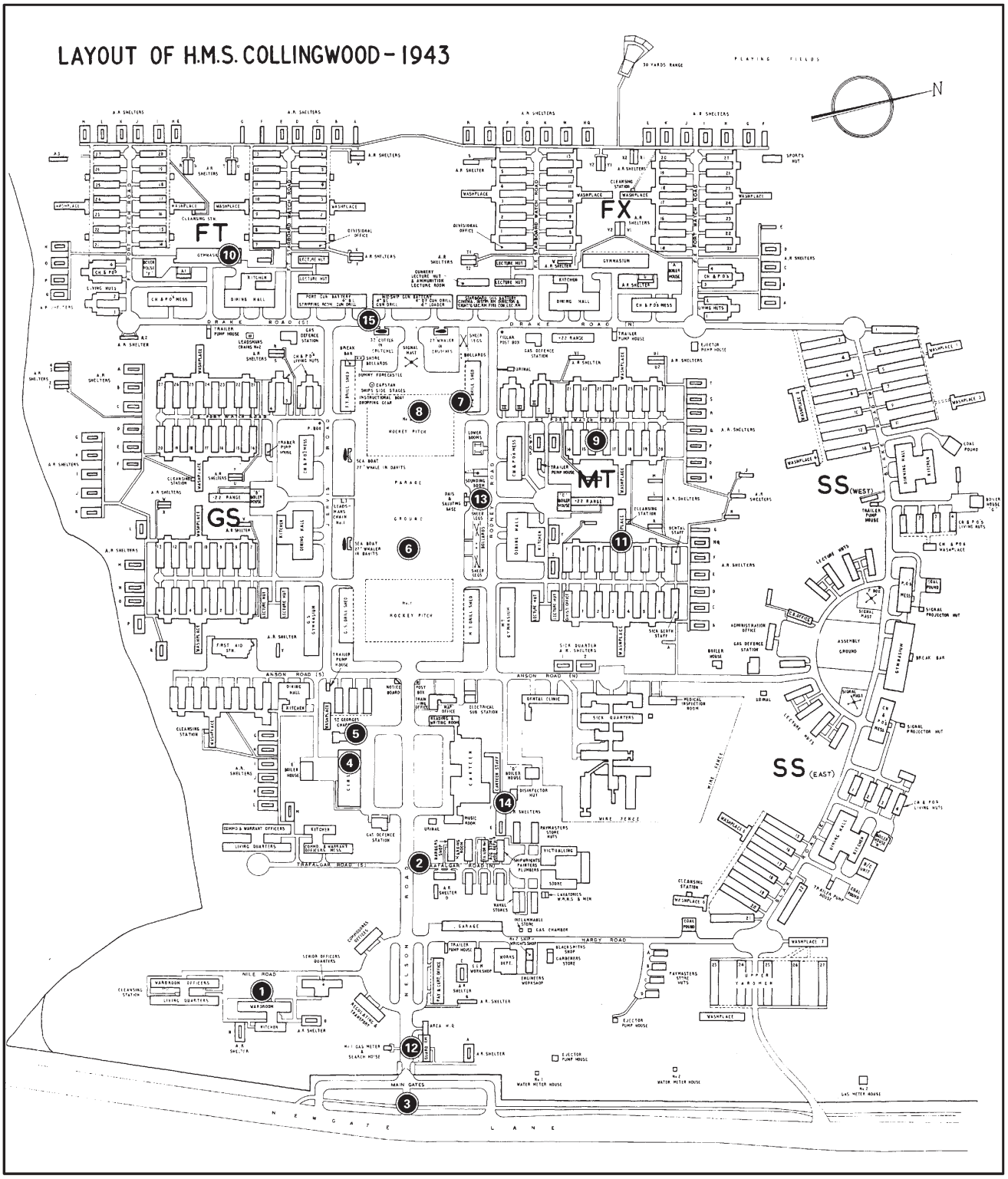
The comparison was taken in 1993. Today, only 80-odd of the wartime buildings remain.

Training commenced on. January 17, 1940, although construction was by no means complete. The gun battery buildings were finished on May 1, and the last of the 308 huts was completed on June 5. Initially, there was no accommodation for the Commodore so he lived in Lysses House in the High Street at Fareham. Gradually, however, matters were sorted out and *Collingwood* settled down to its appointed rôle.

Right from the beginning, members of the Women's Royal Naval Service played their part in the running of the establishment. The first Wren was the daughter of Admiral Sir Edward Charlton, president of the Naval Inter-Allied Commission of Control at the end of the First World War. She brought the family typewriter with her by bicycle from Alverstoke and was appointed Assistant Secretary. Of the first 50 Wrens that joined in January 1940, 47 were completely untrained. The other three were telephone switchboard operators who had previously served with Anti-Aircraft HQ at Fareham House. They were all accommodated in the huts on the eastern side of Anson Road (South). At first, the girls had no uniforms but these arrived in April. It was about this time that the Commodore's secretary, Paymaster-Lieutenant A. J. Pack, had an unusual Wren messenger, namely his wife. The first WRNS officer was Second Officer Marjory Wilson who joined *Collingwood* in April 1940. She was relieved in July by Second Officer Mary Fry, sister of the all-round sportsman and 1912 England cricket captain Charles Burgess Fry. Second Officer Fry was promoted First Officer that December.

The most senior rating on the ship's books, with ship's book No. 1, was Master-at-Arms G. Gibb. When he accompanied the First Lieutenant on the first evening rounds, they became separated and he never caught up due to the sheer size of the establishment.

In June 1940, *Collingwood* took on an additional commitment by way of training Wireless Telegraphy ratings from HMS *St Vincent* in Gosport. They took over the Quarterdeck Division and renamed it General Signals, hence GS on the 1943 map.



The FT (Fore-top) gymnasium [10] is the same building where the French sailors held their acrimonious meeting after the fall of France in June 1940. It is still used as a gym and for Five-a-side football and basketball.

These early days were not without their moments of drama. In June 1940, after the fall of France, a group of French sailors mustered in the Fore-top gymnasium where they were addressed by a French captain and offered the choice of returning to France, joining the Royal Navy or of forming their own Free French force. The meeting ended in uproar but, in the event, some were persuaded to stay.

Apart from the arrival of a second contingent of Wrens that year, the development of the establishment in its wartime rôle was now complete. Work proceeded apace and many thousands of young ratings left *Collingwood* to take their places in the Fleet with a good 'stone frigate' training, the gaps in which could only be filled by experience at sea.

The Royal Navy loves its 'then and now' comparisons! *Above:* **The first five recruits pictured on January 17, 1940 — the day they first joined up!** *Right:* **Five weeks later the same five men were photographed on leaving HMS *Collingwood* on February 21. The pictures were taken outside MT Huts 10 and 11 ([11] on plan).**

In 1942, a further 164 buildings were added along the northern edge of HMS *Collingwood* and became known as 'Ships Staff' (SS) Division. This brought the wartime total to 475. These were then occupied by the Radar School which trained officers and ratings in the operation and maintenance of the Top Secret 'RDF' equipment. The limited size of the main Wardroom made it necessary to provide alternative facilities for the use of the numerous RNVR officers of this organisation within the Radar School itself and they were accommodated in an annexe near the semi-circular assembly ground, which was later renamed the Radar Parade Ground. Only the officer-in-charge was permitted to use the Wardroom proper.

Above: **King George VI inspected HMS *Collingwood* on July 25, 1940 and is seen reviewing the Guard of Honour drawn up in front of the Guardroom [12]. Commodore Sedgewick is directly behind His Majesty followed by Admiral Sir William James, C-in-C Portsmouth. (Unfortunately security considerations preclude a comparison.)**

The work of the establishment had not been organised without enemy interference and, in the early days, much time was lost through the unwanted attention paid to the Portsmouth area by the Luftwaffe. An early alarm occurred on July 25, 1940, during the course of a visit to the establishment by His Majesty King George VI although on this occasion there was no direct attack. An autographed photograph of His Majesty leaving 'F' air raid shelter behind the canteen building commemorates this event and the shelter itself subsequently had a Royal coat-of-arms painted over the entrance.

Right: **The salute during King's Divisions. In the background, the FX Drill Shed with the Midships Gun Battery directly behind the King.** *Below:* **The Women's Royal Naval Service, affectionately known as the 'Wrens'.**

Above: **The Royal Guard marches past the saluting base [13]. We are looking almost due east towards GS Drill Shed on the right with the camp cinema in the centre.** *Below:* **Sadly, the permanent saluting base has since been demolished.**

Left: **During the visit, a 'Red' air raid warning sounded indicating an imminent raid. Although no attack materialised, it served as a good excuse to picture the King emerging from 'F' shelter [14] behind the canteen. To mark the occasion, the Royal cipher was painted over the entrance and His Majesty autographed the photo.** *Above:* **What price history? The shelter was summarily demolished in 1993 to enlarge the car park.**

Another marvellous series depicting ten weeks in the life of the recruits in 1940. This time the comparisons were taken by our reader Paul Mayo who has been posted to *Collingwood* nine times since he joined the Royal Navy in 1975.

Three days after arrival — a labourer, factory hand, commercial traveller and tram conductor — they had been kitted up.

The first air raid damage occurred at lunch time on October 18, 1940, when a stick of three bombs straddled Nelson Road. The first bomb exploded at the rear of the cinema, damaging the stage; the second embedded itself beside the road but failed to explode; whilst number three, an oil bomb, which was also a dud, fell on the site where the training and map office was built in 1942 and which later became the Commander's Office Block. (This is the bombing referred to in *The Blitz Then and Now, Vol. 2*, page 192: 'Bombs dropped by single aircraft on a Naval camp at Fareham.' The oil bomb was a Flammbombe C500 of the type shown on page 164 of *The Blitz, Vol. 1*.)

Then on April 12, 1941, the camp was strafed during ceremonial divisions. There were some casualties but no one was killed. As a result, such assemblies were temporarily banned, not only in *Collingwood*, but throughout the Portsmouth Command. One minor casualty resulting from this raid was the Officers' Leave book which was found to have been hit by a stray bullet.

Worst of all was the bomb which landed on Main-top 15 hut, completely destroying it and severely damaging the adjacent 14 and 16 huts in the early hours of June 18, 1943. No air raid warning was sounded when the aircraft approached so that when the bomb fell all the huts were occupied. This resulted in the deaths of 31 ratings, 30 of them under training, some of whom had only been in *Collingwood* a few days. Most of them were aged 17 or 18 although at least one was older. He was Ordinary Seaman R. J. Blackburn who was 33. He and thirteen other trainees still lie buried in Haslar Naval Cemetery in Gosport. Also killed in the raid was an Instructor, Leading Seaman William Avery, who had a cabin across the corridor from MT 14/15 huts. The buildings were so severely damaged that they had to be completely replaced by the standard 25ft Nissen huts then becoming available.

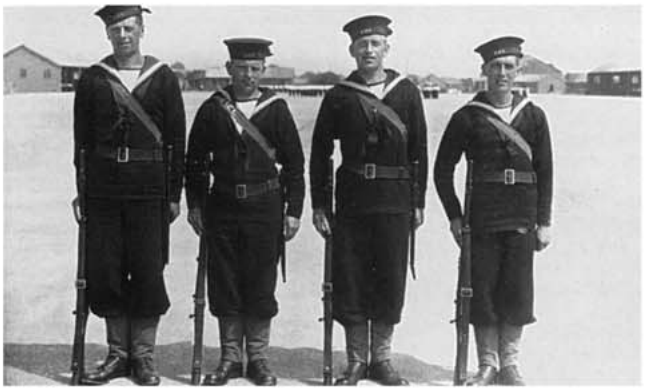
One survivor of hut MT 16, Seaman G. A. Mumford, later died while serving in HMS *Janus* when she was sunk by a German radio-controlled bomb off the Anzio beach-head on January 23, 1944. His name is recorded on Panel 82 of the Royal Navy War Memorial on Southsea sea-front in Portsmouth. Enemy action was not the only cause of death however, as demonstrated by Seaman Lawrence who fell and broke his neck while attempting to leap over a hammock in one of the Nissen huts.

By July 1943, *Collingwood*'s personnel numbered 5,566 and consisted of: 40 Officers; 49 Upper Yardmen (Rating to Officer trainees); 174 Instructors; 28 Royal Marine Bandsmen; 316 Wrens (of which six were Officers); 4,959 Ordinary Seamen under training.

Thus HMS *Collingwood* came through its war scarred but unbowed. On the credit side, the vegetable garden behind the wardroom had been tended throughout by the officers' wives, and many individual 'cabbage patches' cultivated in every possible corner. The most important venture, from a financial return point of view, was the piggery, started in 1941 behind the blacksmith's shop/gardener's store and across Hardy Road next to the gas chamber (used for gas-mask testing), which utilised waste food from the numerous kitchens as pig feed. In 1943-44,

After three weeks the same four recruits pictured beside the whaler at the western end of the parade ground.

Looking shipshape after five weeks. Paul's last posting to *Collingwood* was in 1993, just after the 50th anniversary of the 1943 bombing raid which sparked off his interest in researching the history of the station.



Seven weeks into their training. At least they are showing a semblance of a smile.

the sale of pigs fetched £1,050. This, together with a monthly NAAFI rebate of £100 (reflecting the large numbers of personnel passing through the establishment), sale of surplus pig swill (£600) and sale of waste paper and rags (£150) resulted in a ship's fund of over £3,000.

In August 1944, Commodore Sedgewick was re-appointed to HMS *President* in Shrewsbury, Shropshire, and was relieved by Captain R. H. Bevan. By tradition, the Commodore was towed from the establishment in his car by his officers in true naval fashion.

With the end of the war, seamanship training was run down and communications training transferred to HMS *Mercury*, although for the time being the radar school continued its work without any let-up. By the early months of 1946, part of the establishment was in use as a dispersal centre for the demobilisation of 'hostilities only' personnel; in fact, many who started out on their service careers in HMS *Collingwood* took their leave of the Royal Navy through the gates of the self-same establishment.

COLLINGWOOD POST-WAR

Electricity was first introduced into the Royal Navy in 1870 for the gun-firing circuits of Ironclad ships. At the same time, the first non-contact mine, known as the Electric Torpedo, came into use. The responsibility for both these innovations fell to the Gunnery branch in the form of the Torpedo Gunner. In 1872, HMS *Vernon* was commissioned as a tender to HMS *Excellent* (the gunnery school at Portsmouth) to train Torpedo Officers, and became an independent command in 1876. Other uses of electricity were gradually introduced, including electric light in 1879 and ventilation fans in 1898. By this time, the Torpedo Officer had become responsible for all matters electrical including Wireless Telegraphy (W/T) from 1904, and ASDIC (early Sonar).

In 1920, and again in 1924, the Field-Waistell Committee recommended the formation of the Electrical Branch and although W/T had been relinquished to the Signals Officer in 1917, no further action was taken. However, ASDIC became the responsibility of the Anti-Submarine Officer in 1926 and High Power generation went to the Engine Room department in 1930.

During the war, as a result of the bombing, electrical training facilities had been dispersed from HMS *Vernon* to various places, and it was not until 1943 that the Admiralty Board again considered proposals for the Electrical Branch. After much deliberation the Middleton Steering Committee was set up (under Rear-Admiral H. P. Middleton) in 1945 to make recommendations for the institution of the branch. All Torpedo Branch ratings had to state their preference for the Electrical or TAS (Torpedo Anti-Submarine) branches by the end of the year

On January 1, 1946, the electrical branch was formed and, in due course, HMS *Collingwood* was chosen as most suited to be adapted to meet the needs of an electrical school.

On July 19, all of HMS *Vernon*'s electrical department and the experimental depot at Havant transferred to *Collingwood* to become the Equipment and Trials Department and took over the Starboard Gun

By the time they were ready for posting, the grins are even wider! Picture taken in front of the Port and Midships Battery [15].

And even in the post-war period, the Navy liked its comparison pictures. This sequence shows the last electrical new entry in 1960. The layout of the boats would have been exactly the same during the war. Subsequent new entrants joined HMS *St Vincent* until it closed in 1967, then transferring to HMS *Raleigh* at Plymouth. Paul explains that 'there is no easy way to tell a Royal Navy shore establishment from an RN ship. Historically, shore establishments were called by their title, i.e. Portsmouth Royal Naval Barracks, Devonport Royal Dockyard, Eastney Royal Marines Barracks, etc. However, in the 18th and 19th centuries, as the Navy grew, old hulks that had previously served as HM ships were used as schools and depots. When the hulls became too rotten for any further use, and the occupants were moved ashore, they took the name of the ship they had used with them. Examples of these are HMS *Vernon*, HMS *Defiance*, HMS *Ganges* and HMS *Excellent*.

Battery as its new home. They had to move their own equipment as neither money nor dockyard assistance was available. The Graphics Section from HMS *Vernon* occupied MT gymnasium to became the Drawing and Publication Department, and in 1947 HMS *Marlborough* at Eastbourne closed and also moved to *Collingwood*.

With the arrival of the electricians, a large building programme was begun. In the north-west corner of the establishment, 25 new concrete and brick huts were built to house instructional equipment and became known as White City due to the concrete walls and uncamouflaged white asbestos roofs. Also 17 new classroom buildings were built along a new road (which later became Gibraltar Road) to the north of MT Division, and an instructional cinema was built next to SS (west) 14 building. The wardroom was also enlarged by the addition of three new blocks to accommodate the many additional officers that the new electrical school required, and was opened on May 24, 1947. Due to the enlargement of the wardroom, the Captain had to vacate his quarters and moved into 'Nissen Hall', a collection of six Nissen huts erected behind the Warrant Officers' Mess.

At about this time, all the roads in the establishment were re-named after the ships in which Admiral Lord Collingwood had served — 31 in all. Thus Nelson Road from the main gate to the parade ground became Royal Sovereign Avenue.

By the mid-1950s, continuous pumping had stabilised the 'marsh' enough for multi-storied buildings to be erected. The first, a Chief Petty Officers' accommodation block completed in 1955, was built behind the GS Chief and Petty Officers' Mess on the south side of the parade ground. Over the next nine years, two more blocks and six instructional blocks were built to cover surface and underwater weapons, communications and additional classrooms. Also in 1959, the Captain moved into his new two-storey house built on the site of Nissen Hall.

In 1963, a decision was taken to replace the ageing accommodation huts with new four-storey blocks. Four were built on the west end of the parade ground, thereby reducing its size by about a third. They were completed in September 1965, and followed by six more in July 1966 behind the Midships Gun Battery.

By now, all vacant plots had been used, so to continue re-development of *Collingwood*, demolition of some of the wartime buildings began. The first to go in 1965 were Fisher and Rodney drill sheds which had been used for a while by the contractors during the building of the first four new blocks. Next was Rodney, Hinchingbroke Road (formerly FX Starboard Watch Road) in 1967 to be replaced by a new central dining hall; Port and Midship Batteries (1968) for a Junior Rates' club; all of Howe section (1971-72) for Chief and Petty Officers' Messes and accommodation; and most of Culloden Road (MT Port Watch Road) in 1973, although the three Nissen huts that replaced the bombed huts remained in use as the Car Club until 1978.

In 1973, heating of the establishment was rationalised by the completion of a new oil-fired central boiler house on the site of FX 'A' to 'E' air raid shelters. The remaining coal-fired boiler houses were de-commissioned and reduced to distribution centres for the central heating water.

A new Wardroom opened in 1975 and an administration block was built on the eastern end of the parade ground, again reducing it in size, which resulted in Howe and Anson Drill Sheds being demolished in 1978. The Sick Bay went in 1981, although its facilities were found a new home in the now redundant first two-storey block, followed by piecemeal demolition of many of the instructional huts in the old Radar Section.

Not all the changes were planned as testified by building No. 36 (MT 10 hut). It burnt down on September 6, 1948, after some Dutch ratings had a party with their supply of 'diplomatic-bag' Bols when Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands was succeeded by her daughter Princess Juliana. Also, the hurricane of 1987 accounted for three of the classroom buildings in Gibraltar Road.

Above: **HMS *Collingwood*'s wartime commander, Commodore Sedgewick, being pulled off the base in traditional style on August 31, 1944 on his appointment to HMS *President*.** *Centre right:* **Little changed, an almost exact match taken of the arrival of the Queen Mother on June 11, 1968.**

The Starboard Gun Battery building still remains and is now used as a Main Naval Store and stores 'receipt and despatch' depot.

Sadly, the last of the 134 air raid shelters — the actual one in which King George VI took refuge in 1940 — was demolished in February 1993.

On June 18, 1993, a memorial service was held in St George's Church, HMS *Collingwood* for the 31 Naval ratings killed by the German bomb dropped on the establishment that day 50 years ago. It was attended by 120 guests, most of them ex-Navy personnel who had been in *Collingwood* at the time of the bombing, including Mr Bruce Dundas, Mayor of Fareham 1983-84, and Sir John Chichester, former Captain Royal Scottish Fusiliers, Lieutenant Royal Navy, Kings Messenger and employee of ICI. An oak tree was planted by Mr Dundas and the present commanding officer, Captain V. H. Lucas.

HMS *Collingwood*, the 'temporary' camp of 1939, now stands ready to enter the 21st century as the Premier Electrical School of the Royal Navy. To quote Mr Ferrers-Walker, one of the 'Old Boys' that came to the memorial service and reunion in 1993:

'From Commodore Sedgewick onwards, the reputation of this Shore Establishment bearing the name of Nelson's Second-in-Command, has remained Second to None. Long may it remain.'

COLLINGWOOD TODAY

Today, of the 475 original buildings, only 82 remain and of these just six are of the wooden hut type. The cinema and church are still used for their original purpose but the remaining four have other uses. The Dental Surgery now houses the Fire Station with the brick-built portion housing a NAAFI shop, Post Office and Hairdresser. GS gymnasium is a store and the Paymaster store huts next to the Victualling Stores buildings are currently used by the Barrack Master as a store and workshop.

The largest concentration of original buildings is FT Division, as only seven out of 42 have been demolished over the years. As they were mostly built of brick, they have proved more durable and less maintenance-intensive than their wooden counterparts. Apart from having their covered walk-ways bricked in to form a weather-proof corridor in the 1950s, they have changed little. The original metal roof support posts can still be seen inside the corridors. Naval Stores use many of them as offices and storerooms. Most of the others are used for various clubs, i.e. Model Railway Club, Judo Club, Camera Club, etc.

Left: **June 18, 1993. The commanding officer, Captain Victor Lucas, with the Mayor of Fareham, Bruce Dundas, planting an oak to the memory of the 31 ratings who were killed in 1943.**

Right: **Wartime relics in the station museum include the Ansutz compass, and items recovered from the then-secret radar installation on the *Graf Spee* (see *After the Battle* No. 40).**

THE SPITFIRE AT MALDEGEM

By Frank Raeman

It was during the annual party held in November 1995 by the local fire brigade in Maldegem in eastern Flanders, Belgium, that conversation turned to the possibility that the wreckage of a fighter aircraft which had crashed in the locality in October-November 1944 might still remain buried. As a local voluntary fireman/ambulance driver, and being busy writing the story of the wartime airfield in Maldegem, I was asked by Mr Boudewijn de Schepper what I knew of the aircraft. He also offered the use of his crane to recover any remains of the aircraft discovered. However, we had no idea of the identity of the aircraft.

On Wednesday, April 26, 1996, after having obtained permission from the farmer, Mr Hans de Smet, who owned the field, I began to investigate the area where the plane had crashed. My good friend Mr Fernand Elias had brought along his metal detector and after about 20 minutes we obtained a large reading. In the meantime, Adjutant-Commissioner Jack Crul arrived to keep an eye on the excavation works. We began digging with spades in the middle of a small ditch which formed the boundary between two fields and was fortunately dry. About 80 centimetres (approximately three feet) down we uncovered a large piece of metal — too large to lift — so we called in Mr de Schepper with his crane.

Meanwhile, we cleared away the grass whereupon a black circle of earth indicated the spot where the plane had gone in. More and more aluminium came to light and we carefully sifted each shovelfull of earth for pieces of wreckage. After about 2½ hours' digging, we reached the remains of the cockpit which appeared to be completely smashed to pieces. However, as we carefully brushed the earth away, we came across the pilot slumped against the control column. It was a very emotional moment and my heart was thumping like mad. After talking with Adjutant-Commissioner Crul, we halted the excavation immediately.

Since 1986, it has been an offence to interfere with or excavate the remains of military aircraft crashed in the United Kingdom, whatever nationality, without the specific authority of the Secretary of State, such permission rarely being granted if it is suspected that human remains are present. Not so, of course, on the mainland of Europe, and it was as a result of one such excavation near the town of Maldegem in north-western Belgium in April 1996 that while one mystery was solved, another was created! Crashes on the Continent are not documented to anywhere near the extent of those in Britain and, in many cases, even the nationality of the aircraft is not known before excavation work begins. However, recovery of the aircraft dinghy *above* and other clues soon indicated that a British machine lay buried in the corner of Hans de Smet's 'foreign field'.

Left: **The investigation was organised by Frank Raeman, left, with his friend Fernand Elias, seen here with the Merlin.** *Right:* **Frank loads the remains of the aircraft into containers with the help of a crane loaned by Boudewijn de Schepper, right.**

We immediately contacted the Belgian Ministry of Internal Affairs (War Graves Section), the British Embassy in Brussels, and the local undertaker, Mr Albert Colmann, who came to take away the human remains. Meanwhile, we collected all the aircraft wreckage and put it into secure storage. This included the Merlin engine which was in very good condition, still covered with the oil and grease of 50-odd years ago.

We could see that the pilot was wearing battledress with RAF wings and the 1939-45 ribbon, and that his rank was that of a Squadron Leader. After many weeks of research by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the British Ministry of Defence Historical Branch and Officers' Personnel Records, together with help from Guy de Win who works in the Belgian Military Archives section, it was established that the only pilot of that rank missing in the period between October 28 and November 7, 1944 in that area was a Squadron Leader George St Clair Boyd Reid, 26 years old and serving with No. 91 (Nigerian) Squadron. However, he already had a grave in Slijpe Cemetery, 12 kilometres south-west of Ostend . . . and so the mystery deepened.

GRAVES CONCENTRATION REPORT FORM

Report No. KE[illegible]/WAR/1

The following has been concentrated here:— 5 m. SW. OSTEND

(Name of Cemetery) SLIPE Churchyard WEST FLANDERS.

(Full Map Reference) GSGS 4336 1/100.000 Sht. 2. O. MR. 585952.

(1) Serial No.	(2) Regt. or Corps	(3) Army No.	(4) Name & Initials	(5) Rank	(6) Date of Death	(7) K/A, D/W or Died	(8) Plot	(9) Row	(10) Grave	(11) Date of Reburial	Previous location of grave: Place & Map Ref.	Previous location of grave: Report Number
1	~~R.A.F.~~	~~41469.~~	~~REID. G.S.B.~~ Unknown Aeraman	~~S/Ldr.~~	~~28.10.44.~~	~~K/A~~	-	-	1	23.3.48.	GSGS 4042 1/250.000 Sht. MR. H.8903 Previously buried amongst the remains of a 'Spitfire' in field outside DAMME.	WESCRE/B & H 267

2 M.R.E.U. acceptance No. 2MREU/2038/Air/97.

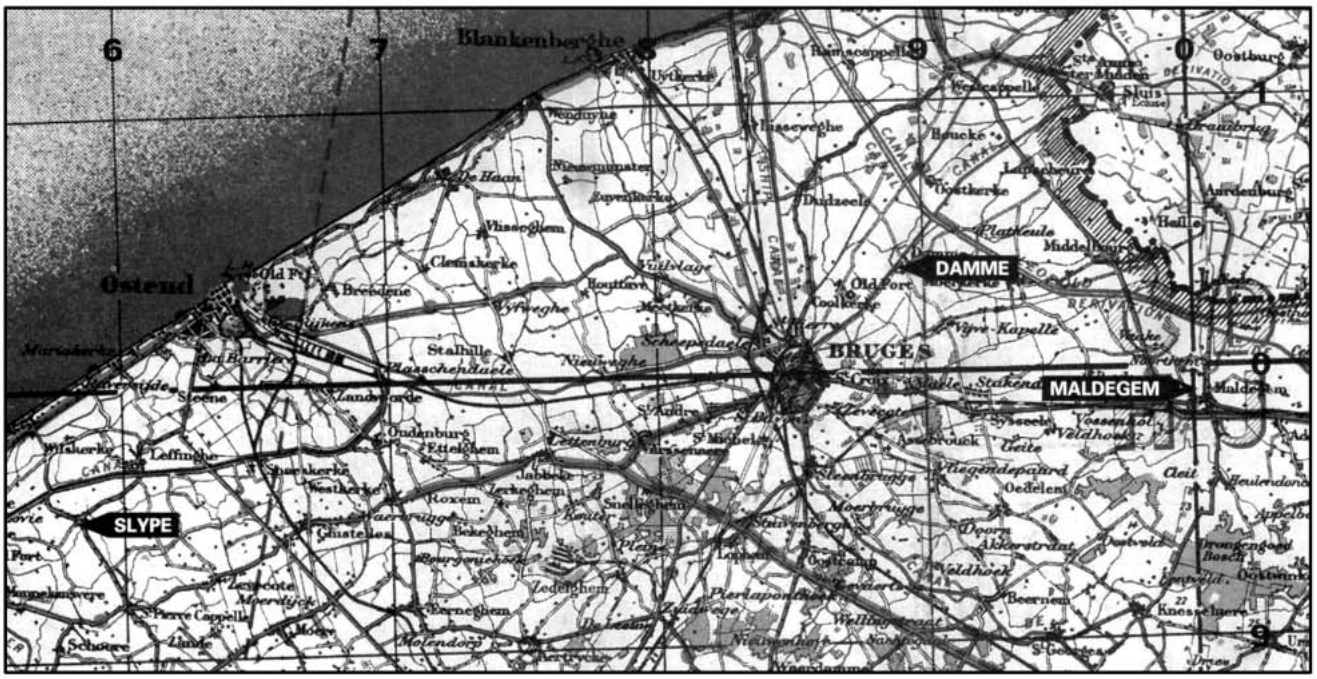
Date 12 April 48.

(Signed) [signature] Col

Rank & Appointment D.D.G.R.E.

Where a grave has not already been registered, a Registration Report on A.F.W. 3572 will be prepared, and attached to this FORM.

Maldegem was liberated on September 12, 1944 (by the South Alberta Regiment of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division) and local people remembered Allied troops trying to recover the remains of the aircraft with a bulldozer. This established the earliest possible date for the crash, while other eyewitness reports indicated that it had occurred around the end of October or early November. Thanks to the recent computerisation of the burial registers by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (see *After the Battle* No. 92, page 38), it is now possible for the Commission to run a search based on known criteria, i.e. rank, dates, unit, area, etc. In this case, when the remains of the pilot came to light, it was seen that he wore the rank of Squadron Leader. Running a check on the database for all those of this rank killed between September 12 and the beginning of November threw up just one name: that of Squadron Leader George Reid of No. 91 (Nigerian) Squadron. Yet the problem was that he already had a grave in a cemetery near Ostend some 50 kilometres away. This is the original record listing his burial, kindly supplied by the Commission, which now bears their recent deletion. Then, markings found on pieces of wreckage tied in with the aircraft he was flying when he failed to return on October 28.



That document is the only evidence in the possession of the Commission appertaining to Squadron Leader Reid's place of death and therein lies a further mystery for British and Commonwealth servicemen are usually buried close to where they were killed. This map extract is from the same contemporary series of GSGS 4042. We have highlighted Reid's purported crash site at H8903, the four-figure map reference given merely to indicate Damme and not sufficiently accurate to pinpoint the actual spot on a small-scale 1/250,000 map. Maldegem lies at 0199, some 12 kilometres to the south-east.

Squadron Leader Reid had taken off from Biggin Hill on the afternoon of October 28 to help escort a force of several hundred aircraft of Bomber Command on a massed attack on Cologne. His aircraft was recorded as being lost due to 'dicey cloud flying' between 1420 and 1425 hours which coincided with the hands of a watch found on the pilot. Also the letters 'DL' on the camera-gun and radio identified it as belonging to No. 91 Squadron and the number '453' pencilled on the reverse of a refuelling panel confirmed that it was, in fact, Reid's Spitfire which bore the serial 'MK453'. So, who was buried in Slijpe?

While extensive enquiries were made to try to identify the occupant of the Slijpe grave, preparations were made to give a proper burial to Squadron Leader Reid with full military honours. As he was a Canadian, a grave location was selected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the nearby Canadian Military Cemetery at Adegem. Members of the Queen's Colour Squadron of the RAF were to act as pall-bearers at the funeral which was arranged for September 6, 1996.

At 9.15 a.m., John and Doris Reid, the brother and sister-in-law of the pilot, who had flown over specially from California, were greeted at Maldegem town hall by the Mayor, Jean Rotsart de Hertaing. The other VIPs included the British Ambassador, John Gray, and Group Captain David Hencken, the British Defence Attaché in Brussels, while representing the Canadians were Minister Counseller George Béchard from the Canadian Embassy. Officers from NATO and SHAPE were also present.

After the funeral, a reception was held in the town hall while pieces of wreckage from the aircraft were placed in the Adegem Canadian Memorial Museum under the custodianship of the curator, Alex Martens. Later, I took John and Doris Reid to show them the crash site.

During the afternoon, the headstone on Squadron Leader Reid's grave at Slijpe was removed and re-erected on the new grave. Later, a new headstone was put on the Slijpe grave marking it as that of an unknown airman.

The Commission is responsible for marking and maintaining war graves and only acts on information supplied by the military authorities. Thus, when erecting a headstone to Squadron Leader Reid on the grave at Slype (Slijpe), there was no reason to doubt the veracity of the Graves Concentration Report Form. So, who is buried in Grave No. 1? There are several possibilities including an unknown Spitfire pilot who crashed nearby in 1941, but Frank Raeman believes it could be a fellow Belgian — a Flight Sergeant Michel de Hepcée — who went missing in the area in 1943. But, for the moment, the grave has been given a new headstone just to an 'Unknown Airman'.

Last respects in Adegem Canadian War Cemetery just outside Maldegem. L-R: Fernand Elias, Alex Martens, Boudewijn de Schepper and, saluting, Frank Raeman. On the right stands John Reid, the pilot's brother, with his wife.

Extensive enquiries in RAF records and those of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission have so far been unable to positively confirm the identity of the body buried there, but we believe it could be that of a Belgian pilot serving with No. 350 (Belgian) Squadron of the RAF who went missing on November 13, 1943 during a sweep over the Belgian coast in the area of the village containing the grave. He was Flight Sergeant Michel de Hepcée but conclusive evidence — or an explanation as to how the mix-up occurred with Squadron Leader Reid who crashed the following year some 50 kilometres away — has so far not been forthcoming. Our investigations continue. . . .

The same day, the new grave was marked by the erection of the headstone transferred from the old.